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ANTHOLOGY

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(and NERO WOLFE)

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ELLERY QUEEN'S ANTHOLOGY

SPRING-
SUMMER
1973

EDITED BY

"Ellery Queen"

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EDITOR'S NOTE

Dear Reader:

This is the 25th in *EQMM's* series of original paperback anthologies, now published twice a year. . .

Number 25. A milestone. An anniversary, and to borrow a symbol from wedding anniversaries (but then haven't *EQA* and its readers been married all these years?), the silver anniversary of this series.

To celebrate the occasion in a special way, we have prepared something different. For the first time in these anthologies we bring you brand-new stories—stories never before published in any form. This group of four new short stories and one new novelet offers such outstanding mystery writers as Lawrence Treat, Edward D. Hoch, Lawrence G. Blochman, and Stephen Marlowe. And if we can continue to find brand-new stories of high quality we plan to include them in future volumes.

The Silver Anniversary Anthology is rich and diverse in stories about world-famous series detectives—a tapestry of 'tecs including

Rex Stout's Nero Wolfe
Stuart Palmer's Hildegard Withers
Edward D. Hoch's Captain Leopold
Stephen Marlowe's Chester Drum
Michael Harrison's "C. Auguste Dupin"
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And equally rich and diverse are the nonseries stories by top-rank mystery writers, including

Hugh Pentecost
Anthony Gilbert
Lawrence Treat
Joe Gores
Celia Fremlin
Rhona Petrie
Lawrence G. Blochman

And once again, as in the earlier 24 anthologies, we have maintained our three editorial criteria: (1) every story must meet the standards of *Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine* as upheld these past 32 years—top quality or top professionalism of writing, and (2) superior originality or superior craftsmanship in plotting; and (3) none of the two short novels, four novelets, and nine short stories in this book has ever appeared in any of the 65 anthologies previously edited by

ELLERY QUEEN



Rex Stout

Poison a la Carte

We can't recall a single Nero Wolfe murder case in which there wasn't at least one very pretty girl or one beautiful woman in the cast of characters; if there hadn't been at least one, Archie Goodwin probably wouldn't have bothered to tell the story and we'd therefore never have known about it. But imagine a Nero Wolfe murder case in which there are twelve (to quote Archie himself) "absolutely irresistibly beautiful and fascinating" young women, their individual and combined beauty "far beyond the wildest dreams of any poet." It staggers the imagination! How can you resist?

Yes, it was that kind of case—a short novel, complete in this anthology, and, to quote Archie again, "one of the most elaborate charades Nero Wolfe has ever staged" . . .

Detectives: NERO WOLFE and ARCHIE GOODWIN

I slanted my eyes down to meet her big brown ones, which were slanted up. "No," I said, "I'm neither a producer nor an agent. My name's Archie Goodwin, and I'm here because I'm a friend of the cook. My reason for wanting it is purely personal."

"I know," she said, "it's my dimples. Men often swoon."

I shook my head. "It's your earrings. They remind me of a girl I once loved in vain. Perhaps if I get to know you well enough—who can tell?"

"Not me," she declared. "Let me alone. I'm nervous, and I don't want to spill the soup. The name is Nora Jaret, without an H, and the number is Stanhope five, six-six-two-one. The earrings were a present from Sir Laurence Olivier. I was sitting on his knee."

I wrote the number down in my notebook, thanked her, and looked around. Most of the collection of attractive young females were gathered in an alcove between two cupboards, but one was over by a table

watching Felix stir something in a bowl. Her profile was fine and her hair was the color of corn silk just before it starts to turn. I crossed to her, and when she turned her head I spoke. "Good evening, Miss—Miss?"

"Annis," she said. "Carol Annis."

I wrote it down, and told her my name. "I am not blunt by nature," I said, "but you're busy, or soon will be, and there isn't time to talk up to it. I was standing watching you and all of a sudden I had an impulse to ask you for your phone number, and I'm no good at fighting impulses. Now that you're close up it's even stronger, and I guess we'll have to humor it."

But I may be giving a wrong impression. Actually I had no special hankering that Tuesday evening for new telephone numbers; I was doing it for Fritz. But that could give a wrong impression, too, so I'll have to explain.

One day in February, Lewis Hewitt, the millionaire orchid fancier for whom Nero Wolfe had once handled a tough problem, had told Wolfe that the Ten for Aristology wanted Fritz Brenner to cook their annual dinner, to be given as usual on April first, Brillat-Savarin's birthday. When Wolfe said he had never heard of the

Ten for Aristology, Hewitt explained that it was a group of ten men pursuing the ideal of perfection in food and drink, and he was one of them. Wolfe had swiveled to the dictionary on its stand at a corner of his desk, and after consulting it had declared that "aristology" meant the science of dining, and therefore the Ten were witlings, since dining was not a science but an art. After a long argument Hewitt had admitted he was licked and had agreed that the name should be changed, and Wolfe had given him permission to ask Fritz to cook the dinner.

In fact, Wolfe was pleased, though of course he wouldn't say so. It took a big slice of his income as a private detective to pay Fritz Brenner, chef and housekeeper in the old brownstone on West 35th Street—about the same as the slice that came to me as his assistant detective and man Friday, Saturday, Sunday, Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, and Thursday—not to mention what it took to supply the kitchen with the raw materials of Fritz's productions. Since I am also the bookkeeper, I can certify that for the year 1957 the kitchen and Fritz cost only slightly less than the plant rooms on the roof bulging with orchids.

So when Hewitt made it

clear that the Ten, though they might be dubs at picking names, were true and trustworthy gourmets, that the dinner would be at the home of Benjamin Schriver, the shipping magnate, who wrote a letter to *The Times* every year on September first denouncing the use of horseradish on oysters, and that the cook would have a free hand on the menu and the Ten would furnish whatever he desired, Wolfe pushed a button to summon Fritz. There was a little hitch when Fritz refused to commit himself until he had seen the Schriver kitchen, but Hewitt settled that by escorting him out front to his Heron town car and driving him down to Eleventh Street to inspect the kitchen.

That's where I was that Tuesday evening, April first, collecting phone numbers—in the kitchen of the four-story Schriver house on Eleventh Street west of Fifth Avenue. Wolfe and I had been invited by Schriver, and though Wolfe dislikes eating with strangers and thinks that more than six at table spoils a meal, he knew Fritz's feelings would be hurt if he didn't go; and besides, if he stayed home who would cook his dinner? Even so, he would probably have balked if he had learned of one detail which Fritz and I knew about but had

carefully kept from him: that the table was to be served by twelve young women, one for each guest.

When Hewitt had told me that, I had protested that I wouldn't be responsible for Wolfe's conduct when the orgy got under way, that he would certainly stamp out of the house when the girls started to squeal. Good lord, Hewitt said, nothing like that; that wasn't the idea at all. It was merely that the Ten had gone to ancient Greece not only for their name but also for other precedents. Hebe, the goddess of youth, had been cupbearer to the gods, so it was the custom of the Ten for Aristology to be waited on by maidens in appropriate dress. When I asked where they got the maidens he said through a theatrical agency, and added that at that time of year there were always hundreds of young actresses out of a job glad to grab at a chance to make fifty bucks, with a good meal thrown in, by spending an evening carrying food, one plate at a time. Originally they had hired experienced waitresses from an agency, but they had tripped on their stolas.

Wolfe and I had arrived at seven on the dot, and after we had met our host and the rest of the Ten, and had sampled

oysters and our choice of five white wines, I had made my way to the kitchen to see how Fritz was making out. He was tasting from a pot on the range, with no more sign of fluster than if he had been at home getting dinner for Wolfe and me. Felix and Zoltan, from Rusterman's, were there to help, so I didn't ask if I was needed.

And there were the Hebes, cupbearers to the gods, twelve of them, in their stolas, deep rich purple flowing garments to their ankles. Very nice. It gave me an idea. Fritz likes to pretend that he has reason, to believe that no damsel is safe within a mile of me, which doesn't make sense since you can't tell much about them a mile off, and I thought it would do him good to see me operate at close quarters. Also, it was a challenge and an interesting sociological experiment. The first two had been a cinch: one named Fern Faber, so she said, a tall blonde with a wide lazy mouth, and Nora Jaret with the big brown eyes and dimples. Now I was after this Carol Annis with hair like corn silk.

"I have no sense of humor," she said and turned back to watch Felix.

I stuck. "That's a different kind of humor and an impulse like mine isn't funny. It hurts.

Maybe I can guess it. Is it Hebe one, oh-oh-oh-oh?"

No reply.

"Apparently not. Plato two, three-four-five-six?"

She said, without turning her head, "It's listed. Gorham eight, three-two-one-seven." Her head jerked to me. "Please?" It jerked back again.

It rather sounded as if she meant please go away, not please ring her as soon as possible, but I wrote it down anyway, for the record, and moved off. The rest of them were still grouped in the alcove, and I crossed over. The deep purple of the stolas was a good contrast for their pretty young faces topped by nine different colors and styles of hair-dos. As I came up the chatter stopped and the faces turned to me.

"At ease," I told them. "I have no official standing. I am merely one of the guests, invited because I'm a friend of the cook, and I have a personal problem. I would prefer to discuss it with each of you separately and privately, but since there isn't time for that—"

"I know who you are," one declared. "You're a detective and you work for Nero Wolfe. You're Archie Goodwin."

She was a redhead with milky skin. "I don't deny it," I told her, "but I'm not here professionally. I don't ask if

I've met you because if I had I wouldn't have forgot—"

"You haven't met me. I've seen you and I've seen your picture. You like yourself. Don't you?"

"Certainly. I string along with the majority. We'll take a vote. How many of you like yourselves? Raise your hands."

A hand went up with a bare arm shooting out of the purple folds, then two more, then the rest of them, including the redhead.

"Okay," I said, "that's settled. Unanimous. My problem is that I decided to look you over and ask the most absolutely irresistibly beautiful and fascinating one of the bunch for her phone number, and I'm stalled. You are all it. In beauty and fascination you are all far beyond the wildest dreams of any poet, and I'm not a poet. So obviously I'm in a fix. How can I possibly pick on one of you, any one, when—"

"Nuts." It was the redhead. "Me, of course. Peggy Choate. Argyle two, three-three-four-eight. Don't call before noon."

"That's not fair," a throaty voice objected. It came from one who looked a little too old for Hebe, and just a shade too plump. It went on, "Do I call you Archie?"

"Sure, that's my name."

"All right, Archie, have your eyes examined." She lifted an arm, baring it, to touch the shoulder of one beside her. "We admit we're all beautiful, but we're not in the same class as Helen Iacono. Look at her!"

I was doing so, and I must say that the throaty voice had a point. Helen Iacono, with deep dark eyes, dark velvet skin, and wavy silky hair darker than either skin or eyes, was unquestionably rare and special. Her lips were parted enough to show the gleam of white teeth, but she wasn't laughing. She wasn't reacting at all, which was remarkable for an actress.

"It may be," I conceded, "that I am so dazzled by the collective radiance that I am blind to the glory of any single star. Perhaps I'm a poet after all. I sound like one. My feeling that I must have the phone numbers of *all* of you is certainly no reflection on Helen Iacono. I admit that that will not completely solve the problem, for tomorrow I must face the question which one to call first. If I feel as I do right now I would have to dial all the numbers simultaneously, and that's impossible. I hope to heaven it doesn't end in a stalemate. What if I can never decide which one to call first? What if it drives me mad? Or what if I gradually sink—"

I turned to see who was tugging at my sleeve. It was Benjamin Schriver, the host, with a grin on his ruddy round face. He said, "I hate to interrupt your speech, but perhaps you can finish it later. We're ready to sit. Will you join us?"

The dining room, on the same floor as the kitchen, three feet or so below street level, would have been too gloomy for my taste if most of the dark wood paneling hadn't been covered with pictures of geese, pheasants, fish, fruit, vegetables, and other assorted edible objects; and also it helped that the tablecloth was white as snow, the wineglasses, seven of them at each place, glistened in the soft light from above, and the polished silver shone. In the center was a low gilt bowl, or maybe gold, two feet long, filled with clusters of Phalaenopsis Aphrodite, donated by Wolfe, cut by him that afternoon from some of his most treasured plants.

As he sat he was scowling at them, but the scowl was not for the orchids; it was for the chair, which, though a little fancy, was perfectly okay for you or me but not for his seventh of a ton. His fundament lapped over at both sides. He erased the scowl when Schriver, at the end

of the table, complimented him on the flowers, and Hewitt, across from him, said he had never seen Phalaenopsis better grown, and the others joined in the chorus, all but the aristologist who sat between Wolfe and me. He was a Wall Street character and a well-known theatrical angel named Vincent Pyle, and was living up to his reputation as an original by wearing a dinner jacket, with tie to match, which looked black until you had the light at a certain slant and then you saw that it was green. He eyed the orchids with his head cocked and his mouth puckered, and said, "I don't care for flowers with spots and streaks. They're messy."

I thought, but didn't say, Okay, drop dead. If I had known that that was what he was going to do in about three hours I might not even have thought it. He got a rise, not from Wolfe or me, or Schriver or Hewitt, but from three others who thought flowers with spots and streaks were wonderful: Adrian Dart, the actor who had turned down an offer of a million a week, more or less, from Hollywood; Emil Kreis, Chairman of the Board of Codex Press, book publishers; and Harvey M. Leacraft, corporation lawyer.

Actually, cupbearers was

what the Hebes were not. The wines, beginning with the Montrachet with the first course, were poured by Felix; but the girls delivered the food, with different routines for different items. The first course, put on individual plates in the kitchen, with each girl bringing in a plate for her aristologist, was small blinis sprinkled with chopped chives, piled with caviar, and topped with sour cream—the point, as far as Fritz was concerned, being that he had made the blinis, starting on them at eleven that morning, and also the sour cream, starting on that Sunday evening. Fritz's sour cream is very special, but Vincent Pyle had to get in a crack. After he had downed all his blinis he remarked, loud enough to carry around the table, "A new idea, putting sand in. Clever. Good for chickens, since they need grit."

The man on my left, Emil Kreis, the publisher, muttered at my ear, "Ignore him. He backed three flops this season."

The girls, who had been coached by Fritz and Felix that afternoon, handled the green turtle soup without a splash. When they had brought in the soup plates Felix brought the bowl, and each girl ladled from it as Felix held it by the plate. I asked Pyle cordially, "Any

sand?" but he said no, it was delicious, and cleaned it up.

I was relieved when I saw that the girls wouldn't dish the fish—flounders poached in dry white wine, with a mussel-and-mushroom sauce that was one of Fritz's specialties. Felix did the dishing at a side table, and the girls merely carried. With the first taste of the sauce there were murmurs of appreciation, and Adrian Dart, the actor, across from Wolfe, sang out, "Superb!" They were making various noises of satisfaction, and Leacraft, the lawyer, was asking Wolfe if Fritz would be willing to give him the recipe, when Pyle, on my right, made a face and dropped his fork on his plate with a clatter.

I thought he was putting on an act, and still thought so when his head dropped and I heard him gnash his teeth, but then his shoulders sagged and he clapped a hand to his mouth, and that seemed to be overdoing it. Two or three of them said something, and he pushed his chair back, got to his feet, said, "You must excuse me, I'm sorry," and headed for the door to the hall. Schriver arose and followed him out. The others exchanged words and glances.

Hewitt said, "A damn shame, but I'm going to finish this," and used his fork.

Someone asked if Pyle had a bad heart, and someone else said no. They all resumed with the flounder and the conversation, but the spirit wasn't the same.

When, at a signal from Felix, the maidens started removing the plates, Lewis Hewitt got up and left the room, came back in a couple of minutes, sat, and raised his voice. "Vincent is in considerable pain. There is nothing we can do, and Ben wishes us to proceed. He will rejoin us when—when he can."

"What is it?" someone asked.

Hewitt said the doctor didn't know. Zoltan entered bearing an enormous covered platter, and the Hebes gathered at the side table, and Felix lifted the cover and began serving the roast pheasant, which had been larded with strips of pork soaked for twenty hours in Tokay, and then—but no. What's the use? The annual dinner of the Ten for Aristology was a flop. Since for years I have been eating three meals a day cooked by Fritz Brenner I would like to show my appreciation by getting in print some idea of what he can do in the way of victuals, but it won't do here. Sure, the pheasant was good enough for gods if there had been any around, and so was the suckling

pig, and the salad, with a dressing which Fritz calls Devil's Rain, and the chestnut croquettes, and the cheese—only the one kind, made in New Jersey by a man named Bill Thompson under Fritz's supervision; and they were all eaten, more or less. But Hewitt left the room three more times and the last time was gone a good ten minutes, and Schriver didn't rejoin the party at all, and while the salad was being served Emil Kreis went out and didn't come back.

When, as coffee and brandy were being poured and cigars and cigarettes passed, Hewitt left his chair for the fifth time, Nero Wolfe got up and followed him out. I lit a cigar just to be doing something, and tried to be sociable by giving an ear to a story Adrian Dart was telling, but by the time I finished my coffee I was getting fidgety. By the glower that had been deepening on Wolfe's face for the past hour I knew he was boiling, and when he's like that, especially away from home, there's no telling about him. He might even have had the idea of aiming the glower at Vincent Pyle for ruining Fritz's meal. So I put what was left of the cigar in a tray, arose, and headed for the door, and was halfway to it when here he came, still glowering.

"Come with me," he snapped, and kept going.

The way to the kitchen from the dining room was through a pantry, twenty feet long, with counters and shelves and cupboards on both sides. Wolfe marched through with me behind. In the kitchen the twelve maidens were scattered around on chairs and stools at tables and counters, eating. A woman was busy at a sink. Zoltan was busy at a refrigerator. Fritz, who was pouring a glass of wine, presumably for himself, turned as Wolfe entered and put the bottle down.

Wolfe went to him, stood, and spoke. "Fritz, I offer my apologies. I permitted Mr. Hewitt to cajole you. I should have known better. I beg your pardon."

Fritz gestured with his free hand, the wineglass steady in the other. "But it is not to pardon, only to regret. The man got sick, that's a pity, only not from my cooking, I assure you."

"You don't need to. Not from your cooking as it left you, but as it reached him. I repeat that I am culpable, but I won't dwell on that now; it can wait. There is an aspect that is exigent." Wolfe turned. "Archie. Are those women all here?"

I had to cover more than

half a circle to count them, scattered as they were. "Yes, sir, all present. Twelve."

"Collect them. They can stand"—he pointed to the alcove—"over there. And bring Felix."

It was hard to believe. They were eating; and for him to interrupt a man, or even a woman, at a meal was unheard of. Not even me. Only in an extreme emergency had he ever asked me to quit food before I was through. Boiling was no name for it. Without even bothering to raise a brow, I turned and called out, "I'm sorry, ladies, but if Mr. Wolfe says it's urgent that settles it. Over there, please? All of you."

Then I went through the pantry corridor, pushed the two-way door, caught Felix's eye, and wiggled a beckoning finger at him, and he came. By the time we got to the kitchen the girls had left the chairs and stools and were gathering at the alcove, but not with enthusiasm. There were mutterings, and some dirty looks for me as I approached with Felix. Wolfe came, with Zoltan and stood, tight-lipped, surveying them.

"I remind you," he said, "that the first course you brought to the table was caviar on blinis topped with sour cream. The portion served to Mr. Vincent Pyle, and eaten by

him, contained arsenic. Mr. Pyle is in bed upstairs, attended by three doctors, and will probably die within an hour. I am speaking—”

He stopped to glare at them. They were reacting, or acting, no matter which. There were gasps and exclamations, and one of them clutched her throat, and another, baring her arms, clapped her palms to her ears. When the glare had restored order Wolfe went on, “You will please keep quiet and listen. I am speaking of conclusions formed by me. My conclusion that Mr. Pyle ate arsenic is based on the symptoms—burning throat, faintness, intense burning pain in the stomach, dry mouth, cool skin, vomiting. My conclusion that the arsenic was in the first course is based, first, on the amount of time it takes arsenic to act; second, on the fact that it is highly unlikely it could have been put in the soup or the fish; and third, that Mr. Pyle complained of sand in the cream or caviar. I admit the possibility that one or both of my conclusions will be proven wrong, but I regard it as remote and I am acting on them.” His head turned. “Fritz. Tell me about the caviar from the moment it was put on the individual plates. Who did that?”

I had once told Fritz that I could imagine no circumstances in which he would look really unhappy, but now I wouldn't have to try. He was biting his lips, first the lower and then the upper. He began, “I must assure you—”

“I need no assurance from you, Fritz. Who put it on the plates?”

“Zoltan and I did.” He pointed. “At that table.”

“And left them there? They were taken from that table by the women?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Each woman took one plate?”

“Yes, sir. I mean, they were told to. I was at the range.”

Zoltan spoke up. “I watched them, Mr. Wolfe. They each took one plate. And believe me, nobody put any arsenic—”

“Please, Zoltan. I add another conclusion: that no one put arsenic in one of the portions and then left to chance which one of the guests would get it. Surely the poisoner intended it to reach a certain one—either Mr. Pyle, or, as an alternative, some other one and it went to Mr. Pyle by mishap. In any case, it was the portion Pyle ate that was poisoned, and whether he got it by design or by mischance is for the moment irrelevant.” His eyes were at the girls. “Which one of you took

that plate to Mr. Pyle?"

No reply. No sound, no movement.

Wolfe grunted. "Pfui. If you didn't know his name, you do now. The man who left during the fish course and who is now dying. Who served him?"

No reply; and I had to hand it to them that no pair of eyes left Wolfe to fasten on Peggy Choate, the redhead. Mine did. "What the heck," I said. "Speak up, Miss Choate."

"I didn't!" she cried.

"That's silly. Of course you did. Twenty people can swear to it. I looked right at you while you were dishing his soup. And when you brought the fish—"

"But I didn't take him that first thing! He already had some!"

Wolfe took over. "Your name is Choate?"

"Yes." Her chin was up. "Peggy Choate."

"You deny that you served the plate of caviar, the first course, to Mr. Pyle?"

"I certainly do."

"But you were supposed to? You were assigned to him?"

"Yes. I took the plate from the table there and went in with it, and started to him, and then I saw that he had some, and I thought I had made a mistake. We hadn't seen the guests. That man"—she pointed to Felix—

"had shown us which chair our guest would sit in, and mine was the second from the right on this side as I went in; but that one had already been served, and I thought someone else had made a mistake or I was mixed up. Anyway, I saw that the man next to him, on his right, hadn't been served, and I gave it to him. That was you. I gave it to you."

"Indeed." Wolfe was frowning at her. "Who was assigned to me?"

That wasn't put on. He actually didn't know. He had never looked at her. He had been irritated that females were serving, and besides, he hates to twist his neck. Of course I could have told him, but Helen Iacono said, "I was."

"Your name, please?"

"Helen Iacono." She had a rich contralto that went fine with the deep dark eyes and dark velvet skin and wavy silky hair.

"Did you bring me the first course?"

"No. When I went in I saw Peggy serving you, and a man on the left next to the end didn't have any, so I gave it to him."

"Do you know his name?"

"I do," Nora Jaret said.

"From the card. He was mine." Her big brown eyes were straight at Wolfe. "His name is

Kreis. He had his when I got there. I was going to take it back to the kitchen, but then I thought, someone has stage fright but I haven't, and I gave it to the man at the end."

"Which end?"

"The left end. Mr. Schriver. He came and spoke to us this afternoon."

She was corroborated by Carol Annis, the one with hair like corn silk who had no sense of humor. "That's right," she said. "I saw her. I was going to stop her, but she had already put the plate down, so I went around to the other side of the table with it when I saw that Adrian Dart didn't have any. I didn't mind because it was him."

"You were assigned to Mr. Schriver?"

"Yes, I served him the other courses; until he left."

It was turning into a ring-around-a-rosy, but the squat was bound to come. All Wolfe had to do was get to one who couldn't claim a delivery, and that would tag her. I was rather hoping it wouldn't be the next one, for the girl with the throaty voice had been Adrian Dart's, and she had called me Archie and had given Helen Iacono a nice tribute. Would she claim she had served Dart herself?

No. She answered without

being asked. "My name is Lucy Morgan," she said, "and I had Adrian Dart, and Carol got to him before I did. There was only one place that didn't have one, on Dart's left, the next but one, and I took it there. I don't know his name."

I supplied it. "Hewitt. Mr. Lewis Hewitt." A better name for it than ring-around-a-rosy would have been passing-the-buck. I looked at Fern Faber, the tall blonde with a wide lazy mouth who had been my first stop on my phone-number tour. "It's your turn, Miss Faber," I told her. "You had Mr. Hewitt. Yes?"

"I sure did." Her voice was pitched so high it threatened to squeak.

"But you didn't take him his caviar?"

"I sure didn't."

"Then who did you take it to?"

"Nobody."

I looked at Wolfe. His eyes were narrowed at her. "What did you do with it, Miss Faber?"

"I didn't do anything with it. There wasn't any."

"Nonsense. There are twelve of you, and there were twelve at the table, and each got a portion. How can you say there wasn't any?"

"Because there wasn't. I was in the john fixing my hair, and

when I came back in she was taking the last one from the table, and when I asked where mine was he said he didn't know, and I went to the dining room and they all had some."

"Who was taking the last one from the table?"

She pointed to Lucy Morgan.

"Whom did you ask where yours was?"

She pointed to Zoltan. "Him."

Wolfe turned. "Zoltan?"

"Yes, sir. I mean, yes, sir, she asked where hers was. I had turned away when the last one was taken. I don't mean I know where she had been, just that she asked me that. I asked Fritz if I should go in and see if they were one short and he said no, Felix was there and would see to it."

Wolfe went back to Fern Faber. "Where is that room where you were fixing your hair?"

She pointed toward the pantry. "In there."

"The door's around the corner," Felix said.

"How long were you in there?"

"My God, I don't know, do you think I timed it? When Archie Goodwin was talking to us, and Mr. Schriver came and said they were going to start, I went pretty soon after that."

Wolfe's head jerked to me. "So that's where you were. I might have known there were young women around. Supposing that Miss Faber went to fix her hair shortly after you left—say three minutes—how long was she at it, if the last plate had been taken from the table when she returned to the kitchen?"

I gave it a thought. "Fifteen to twenty minutes."

He growled at her, "What was wrong with your hair?"

"I didn't say anything was wrong with it." She was getting riled. "Look, Mister, do you want all the details?"

"No." Wolfe surveyed them for a moment, not amiably, took in enough air to fill all his middle—say two bushels—let it out again, turned his back on them, saw the glass of wine Fritz had left on a table, went and picked it up, smelled it, and stood gazing at it. The girls started to make noises, and, hearing them, he put the glass down and came back.

"You're in a pickle," he said. "So am I. You heard me apologize to Mr. Brenner and avow my responsibility for his undertaking to cook that meal. When, upstairs, I saw that Mr. Pyle would die, and reached the conclusions I told you of, I felt myself under compulsion to expose the culprit. I am

committed. When I came down here I thought it would be a simple matter to learn who had served poisoned food to Mr. Pyle, but I was wrong.

"It's obvious now that I have to deal with one who is not only resourceful and ingenious, but also quick-witted and audacious. While I was closing in on her just now, as I thought, inexorably approaching the point where she would either have to contradict one of you or deny that she had served the first course to anyone, she was fleeing at me inwardly, and with reason, for her coup had worked. She had slipped through my fingers, and—"

"But she didn't!" It came from one of them whose name I didn't have. "She said she didn't serve anybody!"

Wolfe shook his head. "No. Not Miss Faber. She is the only one who is eliminated. She says she was absent from this room during the entire period when the plates were being taken from the table, and she wouldn't dare to say that if she had in fact been here and taken a plate and carried it in to Mr. Pyle. She would certainly have been seen by some of you."

He shook his head again. "Not her. But it could have been any other one of you. You—I speak now to that one, still to be identified—you must

have extraordinary faith in your attendant godling, even allowing for your craft. For you took great risks. You took a plate from the table—not the first probably, but one of the first—and on your way to the dining room you put arsenic in the cream. That wasn't difficult; you might even have done it without stopping if you had the arsenic in a paper spill. You could get rid of the spill later, perhaps in the room which Miss Faber calls a john. You took the plate to Mr. Pyle, came back here immediately, got another plate, took it to the dining room, and gave it to one who had not been served. I am not guessing; it had to be like that. It was a remarkably adroit stratagem, but you can't possibly be impregnable."

He turned to Zoltan. "You say you watched as the plates were taken, and each of them took only one. Did one of them come back and take another?"

Zoltan looked fully as unhappy as Fritz. "I'm thinking, Mr. Wolfe. I can try to think, but I'm afraid it won't help. I didn't look at their faces, and they're all dressed alike. I guess I didn't watch very close."

"Fritz?"

"No, sir. I was at the range."

"Then try this, Zoltan. Who were the first ones to take

plates—the first three or four?”

Zoltan slowly shook his head. “I’m afraid it’s no good, Mr. Wolfe. I could try to think, but I couldn’t be sure.” He moved his eyes right to left and back again, at the girls. “I tell you, I wasn’t looking at their faces.” He extended his hands, palms up. “You will consider, Mr. Wolfe, I was not thinking of poison. I was only seeing that the plates were carried properly. Was I thinking which one has got arsenic? No.”

“I took the first plate,” a girl blurted—another whose name I didn’t know. “I took it in and gave it to the man in my chair, the one at the left corner at the other side of the table, and I stayed there. I never left the dining room.”

“Your name, please?”

“Marjorie Quinn.”

“Thank you. Now the second plate. Who took it?”

Apparently nobody. Wolfe gave them ten seconds, his eyes moving to take them all in, his lips tight. “I advise you,” he said, “to jog your memories, in case it becomes necessary to establish the order in which you took the plates by dragging it out of you. I hope it won’t come to that.” His head turned. “Felix, I have neglected you purposely, to give you time to reflect. You were in the dining room. My expectation was that

after I had learned who had served the first course to Mr. Pyle you would corroborate it, but now that there is nothing for you to corroborate I must look to you for the fact itself. I must ask you to point her out.”

In a way Wolfe was Felix’s boss. When Wolfe’s oldest and dearest friend, Marko Vukcic, who had owned Rusterman’s restaurant, had died, his will had left the restaurant to members of the staff in trust, with Wolfe as the trustee, and Felix was the maitre d’hotel. With that job at the best restaurant in New York, naturally Felix was both bland and commanding, but now he was neither. If he felt the way he looked, he was miserable.

“I can’t,” he said.

“Pfui! You, trained as you are to see everything?”

“That is true, Mr. Wolfe. I knew you would ask me this, but I can’t. I can only explain. The young woman who just spoke, Marjorie Quinn, was the first one in with a plate, as she said. She did not say that as she served it one of the blinis slid off onto the table, but it did. As I sprang toward her she was actually about to pick it up with her fingers, and I jerked her away and put it back on the plate with a fork, and I gave her a look. Anyway, I was not myself. Having women as

waiters was bad enough, and not only that, they were without experience. When I recovered command of myself I saw the red-headed one, Choate, standing back of Mr. Pyle, to whom she had been assigned, with a plate in her hand, and I saw that he had already been served. As I moved forward she stepped to the right and served the plate to you. The operation was completely upset, and I was helpless. The dark-skinned one, Iacono, who was assigned to you, served Mr. Kreis, and the—"

"If you please." Wolfe was curt. "I have heard them, and so have you. I have always found you worthy of trust, but it's possible that in your exalted position, maitre d'hotel at Rusterman's, you would rather dodge than get involved in a poisoning. Are you dodging, Felix?"

"Good God, Mr. Wolfe, I *am* involved!"

"Very well. I saw that woman spill the blini and start her fingers for it, and I saw you retrieve it. Yes, you're involved, but not as I am." He turned to me. "Archie. You are commonly my first resort, but now you are my last. You sat next to Mr. Pyle. Who put that plate before him?"

Of course I knew that was coming, but I hadn't been

beating my brain because there was no use. I said merely but positively, "No." He glared at me and I added, "That's all, just no, but like Felix I can explain. First, I would have had to turn around to see her face, and that's bad table manners. Second, I was watching Felix rescue the blini. Third, there was an argument going on about flowers with spots and streaks, and I was listening to it and so were you. I didn't even see her arm."

Wolfe stood and breathed. He shut his eyes and opened them again, and breathed some more. "Incredible," he muttered. "The wretch had incredible luck."

"I'm going home," Fern Faber said. "I'm tired."

"So am I," another one said, and was moving, but Wolfe's eyes pinned her. "I advise you not to," he said. "It is true that Miss Faber is eliminated as the culprit, and also Miss Quinn, since she was under surveillance by Felix while Mr. Pyle was being served, but I advise even them to stay. When Mr. Pyle dies the doctors will certainly summon the police, and it would be well for all of you to be here when they arrive. I had hoped to be able to present them with an exposed murderer. Confound it! There is still a chance: Archie, come

with me. Fritz, Felix, Zoltan, remain with these women. If one or more of them insist on leaving do not detain them by force, but have the names and the times of departure. If they want to eat, feed them. I'll be—"

"I'm going home," Fern Faber said stubbornly.

"Very well, go. You'll be got out of bed by a policeman before the night's out. I'll be in the dining room, Fritz. Come, Archie."

He went and I followed, along the pantry corridor and through the two-way door. On the way I glanced at my wrist watch: ten past eleven. I rather expected to find the dining room empty, but it wasn't. Eight of them were still there, the only ones missing being Schriver and Hewitt, who were probably upstairs. The air was heavy with cigar smoke. All of them but Adrian Dart were at the table with their chairs pushed back at various angles, with brandy glasses and cigars. Dart was standing with his back to a picture of honkers on the wing, holding forth. As we entered he stopped and heads turned.

Emil Kreis spoke. "Oh, there you are. I was coming to the kitchen but didn't want to butt in. Schriver asked me to apologize to Fritz Brenner. Our

custom is to ask the chef to join us with champagne, which is barbarous but gay, but of course in the circumstances..." He let it hang, and added, "Shall I explain to him? Or will you?"

"I will." Wolfe went to the end of the table and sat. He had been on his feet for nearly two hours—all very well for his twice-a-day sessions in the plant rooms, but not elsewhere. He looked around. "Mr. Pyle is still alive?"

"We hope so," one said. "We sincerely hope so."

"I ought to be home in bed," another one said. "I have a hard day tomorrow. But it doesn't seem..." He took a puff on his cigar.

Emil Kreis reached for the brandy bottle. "There's been no word since I came down." He looked at his wrist. "Nearly an hour ago. I suppose I should go up. It's so damned unpleasant." He poured brandy.

"Terrible," one said. "Absolutely terrible. I understand you were asking which one of the girls brought him the caviar. Kreis says you asked him."

Wolfe nodded. "I also asked Mr. Schriver and Mr. Hewitt. And Mr. Goodwin and Mr. Brenner, and the two men who came to help at my request. And the women themselves. After more than an hour with

them I am still at fault. I have discovered the artifice the culprit used, but not her identity."

"Aren't you a bit premature?" Leacraft, the lawyer, asked. "There may be no culprit. An acute and severe gastric disturbance may be caused—"

"Nonsense. I am too provoked for civility, Mr. Leacraft. The symptoms are typical of arsenic, and you heard Mr. Pyle complain of sand, but that's not all. I said I have discovered the artifice. None of them will admit serving him the first course. The one assigned to him found he had already been served and served me instead. There is indeed a culprit. She put arsenic in the cream *en passant*, served it to Mr. Pyle, returned to the kitchen for another portion, and came and served it to someone else. That is established."

"But then," the lawyer objected, "one of them served no one. How could that be?"

"I am not a tyro at inquiry, Mr. Leacraft. I'll ravel it for you later if you want, but now I want to get on. It is no conjecture that poison was given to Mr. Pyle by the woman who brought him the caviar; it is a fact. By a remarkable combination of cunning and luck she has so far eluded

identification, and I am appealing to you. All of you. I ask you to close your eyes and recall the scene. We are here at table, discussing the orchids—the spots and streaks. The woman serving that place—he pointed—"lets a blini slip from the plate and Felix retrieves it. It helps to close your eyes. Just about then a woman enters with a plate, goes to Mr. Pyle, and puts it before him. I appeal to you; which one?"

Emil Kreis shook his head. "I told you upstairs, I don't know. I didn't see her. Or if I did, it didn't register."

Adrian Dart, the actor, stood with his eyes closed, his chin up, and his arms folded, a fine pose for concentration. The others, even Leacraft, had their eyes closed too, but of course they couldn't hold a candle to Dart. After a long moment the eyes began to open and heads to shake.

"It's gone," Dart said in his rich musical baritone. "I must have seen it, since I sat across from him, but it's gone. Utterly."

"I didn't see it," another said. "I simply didn't see it."

They made it unanimous.

Wolfe put his palms on the table. "Then I'm in for it," he said grimly. "I am your guest, gentlemen, and would not be offensive, but I am to blame

that Fritz Brenner was enticed to this deplorable fiasco. If Mr. Pyle dies, as he surely will—”

The door opened and Benjamin Schriver entered. Then Lewis Hewitt, and then the familiar burly frame of Sergeant Purley Stebbins of Manhattan Homicide West.

Schriver crossed to the table and spoke. “Vincent is dead. Half an hour ago. Doctor Jameson called the police. He thinks that it is practically certain—”

“Hold it,” Purley growled at his elbow. “I’ll handle it if you don’t mind.”

“My God,” Adrian Dart groaned, and shuddered magnificently.

That was the last I heard of the affair from an aristologist.

“I did not!” Inspector Cramer roared. “Quit twisting my words around! I didn’t charge you with complicity! I merely said you’re concealing something, and what the hell is that to scrape your neck? You always do!”

It was a quarter to two Wednesday afternoon. We were in the office on the first floor of the old brownstone on West 35th Street—Wolfe in his oversized chair. The daily schedule was messed beyond repair. When we had finally got home, at five o’clock in the

morning, Wolfe had told Fritz to forget about breakfast until further notice, and had sent me up to the plant rooms to leave a note for Theodore saying that he would not appear at nine in the morning and perhaps not at all. It had been not at all. At half past eleven he had buzzed on the house phone to tell Fritz to bring up the breakfast tray with four eggs and ten slices of bacon instead of two and five, and it was past one o’clock when the sounds came of his elevator and then his footsteps in the hall, heading for the office.

If you think a problem child is tough, try handling a problem elephant. He is plenty knotty even when he is himself, and that day he was really special. After looking through the mail, glancing at his desk calendar, and signing three checks I had put on his desk, he snapped at me, “A fine prospect. Dealing with them singly would be interminable. Will you have them all here at six o’clock?”

I kept calm. I merely asked, “All of whom?”

“You know quite well. Those women.”

I still kept calm. “I should think ten of them would be enough. You said yourself that two of them can be crossed off.”

“I need them all. Those two

can help establish the order in which the plates were taken."

I held on. I too was short on sleep, shorter even than he, and I didn't feel up to a fracas. "I have a suggestion," I said. "I suggest that you postpone operations until your wires are connected again. Counting up to five hundred might help. You know damn well that all twelve of them will spend the afternoon either at the District Attorney's office or receiving

official callers at their homes—probably most of them at the D.A.'s office. And probably they'll spend the evening there, too. Do you want some aspirin?"

"I want *them*," he growled.

I could have left him to grope back to normal on his own and gone up to my room for a nap, but after all he pays my salary. So I picked up a sheet of paper I had typed and handed it to him. It read:

	<i>Assigned to</i>	<i>Served</i>
Peggy Choate	Pyle	Wolfe
Helen Iacono	Wolfe	Kreis
Nora Jaret	Kreis	Schrivier
Carol Annis	Schrivier	Dart
Lucy Morgan	Dart	Hewitt
Fern Faber	Hewitt	No one

"Fern Faber's out," I said, "and I realize it doesn't have to be one of those five, even though Lucy Morgan took the last plate. Possibly one or two others took plates after Peggy Choate did, and served the men they were assigned to. But it seems—"

I stopped because he had crumpled it and dropped it in the wastebasket. "I heard them," he growled. "My faculties, including my memory, are not impaired. I am merely ruffled beyond the bounds of tolerance."

For him that was an abject

apology, and a sign that he was beginning to regain control. But a few minutes later, when the bell rang, and after a look through the one-way glass panel of the front door I told him it was Cramer, and he said to admit him, and Cramer marched in and planted his fanny on the red leather chair and opened up with an impolite remark about concealing facts connected with a murder, Wolfe had cut loose; and Cramer asked him what the hell was that to scrape his neck, which was a new one to me but sounded somewhat vulgar for

an Inspector. He had probably picked it up from some hoodlum.

Ruffling Cramer beyond the bounds of tolerance did Wolfe good. He leaned back in his chair. "Everyone conceals something," he said placidly. "Or at least omits something, if only because to include everything is impossible. During those wearisome hours, nearly six of them, I answered all questions, and so did Mr. Goodwin. Indeed, I thought we were helpful. I thought we had cleared away some rubble."

"Yeah." Cramer wasn't grateful. His big pink face was always a little pinker than normal, not with pleasure, when he was tackling Wolfe. "You had witnessed the commission of a murder, and you didn't notify—"

"It wasn't a murder until he died."

"All right, a felony. You not only failed to report it, you—"

"That a felony had been committed was my conclusion. Others present disagreed with me. Only a few minutes before Mr. Stebbins entered the room, Mr. Leacraft, a member of the bar and therefore himself an officer of the law, challenged my conclusion."

"You should have reported it. You're a licensed detective. Also you started an investiga-

tion, questioning the suspects—"

"Only to test my conclusion. I would have been a ninny to report it before learning—"

"Damn it," Cramer barked, "will you let me finish a sentence? Just one?"

Wolfe's shoulders went up an eighth of an inch and down again. "Certainly, if it has import. I am not baiting you, Mr. Cramer. But I have already replied to these imputations, to you and Mr. Stebbins and an Assistant District Attorney. I did not wrongly delay reporting a crime, and I did not usurp the function of the police. Very well, finish a sentence."

"You knew Pyle was dying. You said so."

"Also my own conclusion. The doctors were trying to save him."

Cramer took a breath. He looked at me, saw nothing inspiring, and returned to Wolfe. "I'll tell you why I'm here. Those three men—the cook, the man that helped him, and the man in the dining room—Fritz Brenner, Felix Courbet, and Zoltan Mahany—were all supplied by you. All close to you. I want to know about them, or at least two of them. I might as well leave Fritz out of it. In the first place, it's hard to believe that Zoltan doesn't know who took the

first two or three plates or whether one of them came back for a second one, and it's also hard to believe that Felix doesn't know who served Pyle."

"It is indeed," Wolfe agreed. "They are highly trained men. But they have been questioned."

"They sure have. It's also hard to believe that Goodwin didn't see who served Pyle. He sees everything."

"Mr. Goodwin is present. Discuss it with him."

"I have. Now I want to ask your opinion of a theory. I know yours, and I don't reject it, but there are alternatives. First, a fact. In a metal trash container in the kitchen—not a garbage pail—we found a small roll of paper, ordinary white paper that had been rolled into a tube, held with tape, smaller at one end. The laboratory has found particles of arsenic inside. The only two fingerprints on it that are any good are Zoltan's. He says he saw it on the kitchen floor under a table some time after the meal had started, he can't say exactly when, and he picked it up and dropped it in the container, and his prints are on it because he pinched it to see if there was anything in it."

Wolfe nodded. "As I surmised. A paper spill."

"Yeah. I don't say it kills

your theory. She could have shaken it into the cream without leaving prints, and she certainly wouldn't have dropped it on the floor if there was any chance it had her prints. But it *has* got Zoltan's. What's wrong with the theory that Zoltan poisoned one of the portions and saw that it was taken by a certain one? I'll answer that myself. There are two things wrong with it. First, Zoltan claims he didn't know which guest any of the girls were assigned to. But Felix knew, and they could have been in collusion. Second, the girls all deny that Zoltan indicated which plate they were to take, but you know how that is. He could have done it without her knowing it. What else is wrong with it?"

"It's not only untenable, it's egregious," Wolfe declared. "Why, in that case, did one of them come back for another plate?"

"She was confused. Nervous. Dumb."

"Bosh. Why doesn't she admit it?"

"Scared."

"I don't believe it. I questioned them before you did." Wolfe waved it away. "Tommyrot, and you know it. My theory is not a theory; it is a reasoned conviction. I hope it is being acted on. I suggested to

Mr. Stebbins that he examine their garments to see if some kind of pocket had been made in one of them. She had to have it readily available."

"He did. They all had pockets. The laboratory has found no trace of arsenic." Cramer uncrossed his legs. "But I wanted to ask you about those men. You know them."

"I do, yes. But I do not answer for them. They may have a dozen murders on their souls, but they had nothing to do with the death of Mr. Pyle. If you are following up my theory—my conviction, rather—I suppose you have learned the order in which the women took the plates."

Cramer shook his head. "We have not, and I doubt if we will. All we have is a bunch of contradictions. You had them good and scared before we got to them. We do have the last five, starting with Peggy Choate, who found that Pyle had been served and gave it to you, and then—but you got that yourself."

"No. I got those five, but not that they were the last. There might have been others in between."

"There weren't. It's pretty well settled that these five were the last. After Peggy Choate the last four plates were taken by Helen Iacono, Nora Jaret, Carol

Annis, and Lucy Morgan. Then that Fern Faber, who had been in the can, but there was no plate for her. It's the order in which they took them before that, the first seven, that we can't pry out of them—except the first one, that Marjorie Quinn. You couldn't either."

Wolfe turned a palm up. "I was interrupted."

"You were not. You left them there in a huddle, scared stiff, and went to the dining room to start in on the men. Your own private murder investigation, and to hell with the law. I was surprised to see Goodwin here when I rang the bell just now. I supposed you'd have him out running errands like calling at the agency they got the girls from. Or getting a line on Pyle to find a connection between him and one of them. Unless you're no longer interested?"

"I'm interested willy-nilly," Wolfe declared. "As I told the Assistant District Attorney, it is on my score that a man was poisoned in food prepared by Fritz Brenner. But I do not send Mr. Goodwin on fruitless errands. He is one and you have dozens, and if anything is to be learned at the agency or by inquiry into Mr. Pyle's associations your army will dig it up. They're already at it, of course, but if they had started a trail

you wouldn't be here. If I send Mr. Goodwin—"

The doorbell rang and I got up and went to the hall. At the rear the door to the kitchen swung open partway and Fritz poked his head through, saw me, and withdrew. Turning to the front for a look through the panel, I saw that I had exaggerated when I told Wolfe that all twelve of them would be otherwise engaged. At least one wasn't. There on the stoop was Helen Iacono.

It had sounded to me as if Cramer had about said his say and would soon be moving along, and if he bumped into Helen Iacono in the hall she might be too embarrassed to give me her phone number, if that was what she had come for; so as I opened the door I pressed a finger to my lips and *ssh*ed at her, and then crooked the finger to motion her in. Her deep dark eyes looked a little startled, but she stepped across the sill, and I shut the door, turned, opened the first door on the left, to the front room, motioned to her to enter, followed, and closed the door.

"What's the matter?" she whispered.

"Nothing now," I told her. "This is soundproofed. There's a police inspector in the office with Mr. Wolfe and I thought

you might have had enough of cops for now. But if you want to meet him—"

"I don't. I want to see Nero Wolfe."

"Okay, I'll tell him as soon as the cop goes. Have a seat. It shouldn't be long."

There is a connecting door between the front room and the office, but I went around through the hall, and here came Cramer. He was marching by without even the courtesy of a grunt, but I stepped to the front to let him out, and then went to the office and told Wolfe, "I've got one of them in the front room. Helen Iacono, the tawny-skinned Hebe who had you but gave her caviar to Kreis. Shall I keep her while I get the rest of them?"

He made a face. "What does she want?"

"To see you."

He took a breath. "Confound it. Bring her in."

I went and opened the connecting door, told her to come, and escorted her across to the red leather chair. She was more ornamental in it than Cramer, but not nearly as impressive as she had been at first sight. She was puffy around the eyes and her skin had lost some glow. She told Wolfe she hadn't had any sleep. She said she had just left the District Attorney's office, and

if she went home her mother would be at her again, and her brothers and sisters would come home from school and make noise, and anyway she had decided she had to see Wolfe. Her mother was old-fashioned and didn't want her to be an actress. It was beginning to sound as if what she was after was a place to take a nap, but then Wolfe got a word in.

He said drily, "I didn't suppose, Miss Iacono, you came to consult me about your career."

"Oh, no. I came because you're a detective and you're very clever and I'm afraid. I'm afraid they'll find out something I did, and if they do I won't have any career. My parents won't let me even if I'm still alive. I nearly gave it away already when they were asking me questions. So I decided to tell you about it and then if you'd help me I'll help you. If you promise to keep my secret."

"I can't promise to keep a secret if it is a guilty one—if it is a confession of a crime or knowledge of one."

"It isn't."

"Then you have my promise, and Mr. Goodwin's. We have kept many secrets."

"All right. I stabbed Vincent Pyle with a knife and got blood on me."

I stared. For half a second I thought she meant that he hadn't died of poison at all, that she had sneaked upstairs and stuck a knife in him, which seemed unlikely since the doctors would probably have found the hole.

Apparently she wasn't going on, and Wolfe spoke. "Ordinarily, Miss Iacono, stabbing a man is considered a crime. When and where did this happen?"

"It wasn't a crime because it was in self-defense." Her rich contralto was as composed as if she had been telling us the multiplication table. Evidently she saved the inflections for her career. She was continuing. "It happened in January, about three months ago. Of course I knew about him—everybody in show business does. I don't know if it's true that he backs shows just so he can get girls, but it might as well be. There's a lot of talk about the girls he gets, but nobody really knows because he was always very careful about it. Some of the girls have talked but he never did. I don't mean just taking them out, I mean the last ditch. We say that on Broadway. You know what I mean?"

"I can surmise."

"Sometimes we say the last stitch, but it means the same thing. Early last winter he began on me. Of course I knew

about his reputation, but he was backing *Jack in the Pulpit* and they were about to start casting, and I didn't know it was going to be a flop, and if a girl expects to have a career she has to be sociable. I went out with him a few times, dinner and dancing and so forth, and then he asked me to his apartment, and I went. He cooked the dinner himself—I said he was very careful. Didn't I?"

"Yes."

"Well, he was. It's a penthouse on Madison Avenue, but no one else was there. I let him kiss me. I figured it like this, an actress gets kissed all the time on the stage and the screen and TV, and what's the difference? I went to his apartment three times and there was no real trouble, but the fourth time—that was in January—he turned into a beast right before my eyes, and I had to do something, and I grabbed a knife from the table and stabbed him with it. I got blood on my dress, and when I got home I tried to get it out but it left a stain. It cost forty-six dollars."

"But Mr. Pyle recovered."

"Oh, yes. I saw him a few times after that, I mean just by accident, but he barely spoke and so did I. I don't think he ever told anyone about it, but

what if he did? What if the police find out about it?"

Wolfe grunted. "That would be regrettable, certainly. You would be pestered even more than you are now. But if you have been candid with me you are not in mortal jeopardy. The police are not simpletons. You wouldn't be arrested for murdering Mr. Pyle last night, let alone convicted, merely because you stabbed him in self-defense last January."

"Of course I wouldn't," she agreed. "That's not it. It's my mother and father. They'd find out about it because they would ask them questions, and if I'm going to have a career I would have to leave home and my family, and I don't want to. Don't you see?" She came forward in the chair. "But if they find out right away who did it, who poisoned him, that would end it and I'd be all right. Only I'm afraid they won't find out right away, but I think you could if I help you, and you said last night that you're committed. I can't offer to help the police because they'd wonder why."

"I see." Wolfe's eyes were narrowed at her. "How do you propose to help me?"

"Well, I figure it like this." She was on the edge of the chair. "The way you explained it last night, one of the girls

poisoned him. She was one of the first ones to take a plate in, and then she came back and got another one. I don't quite understand why she did that, but you do, so all right. But if she came back for another plate that took a little time, and she must have been one of the last ones, and the police have got it worked out who were the last five. I know that because of the questions they asked this last time. So it was Peggy Choate or Nora Jaret or Carol Annis or Lucy Morgan."

"Or you."

"No, it wasn't me." Just matter-of-fact. "So it was one of them. And she didn't poison him just for nothing, did she? You'd have to have a very good reason to poison a man, I know I would. So all we have to do is find out which one had a good reason, and that's where I can help. I don't know Lucy Morgan, but I know Carol a little, and I know Nora and Peggy even better. And now we're in this together, and I can pretend to them I want to talk about it. I can talk about him because I had to tell the police I went out with him a few times, because I was seen with him and they'd find out, so I thought I'd better tell them. Dozens of girls went out with him, but he was so careful that nobody knows which ones went

to the last ditch except the ones that talked. And I can find out which one of those four girls had a reason, and tell you, and that will end it."

I was congratulating myself that I hadn't got her phone number; and if I had got it, I would have crossed it off without a pang. I don't say that a girl must have true nobility of character before I'll buy her a lunch, but you have to draw the line somewhere. Thinking that Wolfe might be disgusted enough to put into words the way I felt, I horned in. "I have a suggestion, Miss Iacono. You could bring them here, all four of them, and let Mr. Wolfe talk it over with them. As you say, he's very clever."

She looked doubtful. "I don't believe that's a good idea. I think they'd be more apt to say things to me, just one at a time. Don't you think so, Mr. Wolfe?"

"You know them better than I do," he muttered. He was controlling himself.

"And then," she said, "when we find out which one had a reason, and we tell the police, I can say that I saw her going back to the kitchen for another plate. Of course just where I saw her, where she was and where I was, that will depend on who she is. I saw you, Mr. Wolfe, when I said you could if

I helped you, I saw the look on your face. You didn't think a twenty-year-old girl could help, did you?"

He had my sympathy. Of course what he would have liked to say was that it might well be that a twenty-year-old hellcat could help, but that wouldn't have been tactful.

"I may have been a little skeptical," he conceded. "And it's possible that you're oversimplifying the problem. We have to consider all the factors. Take one: her plan must have been not only premeditated but also thoroughly rigged, since she had the poison ready. So she must have known that Mr. Pyle would be one of the guests. Did she?"

"Oh, yes. We all did. Mr. Buchman at the agency showed us a list of them and told us who they were, only of course he didn't have to tell us who Vincent Pyle was. That was about a month ago, so she had plenty of time to get the poison. Is arsenic very hard to get?"

"Not at all. It is in common use for many purposes. That is of course one of the police lines of inquiry, but she knew it would be and she is no bungler. Another point: when Mr. Pyle saw her there, serving food, wouldn't he have been on his guard?"

"But he didn't see her. They didn't see any of us before. She came up behind him and gave him that plate. Of course he saw her afterwards, but he had already eaten it."

Wolfe persisted. "But then? He was in agony, but he was conscious and could speak. Why didn't he denounce her?"

She gestured impatiently. "I guess you're not as clever as you're supposed to be. He didn't know she had done it. When he saw her she was serving another man, and—"

"What other man?"

"How do I know? Only it wasn't you, because I served you. And anyway, maybe he didn't know she wanted to kill him. Of course she had a good reason, I know that, but maybe he didn't know she felt like that. A man doesn't know how a girl feels—anyhow, some girls. Look at me. He didn't know I would never dream of going to the last ditch. He thought I would give up my honor and my virtue just to get a part in that play he was backing, and anyhow it was a flop." She gestured again. "I thought you wanted to get her. All you do is make objections."

Wolfe rubbed the side of his nose. "I do want to get her, Miss Iacono. I intend to. But like Mr. Pyle, though from a different motive, I am very

careful. I can't afford to botch it. I fully appreciate your offer to help. You didn't like Mr. Goodwin's suggestion that you get them here in a body for discussion with me, and you may be right. But I don't like your plan, for you to approach them singly and try to pump them. Our quarry is a malign and crafty harpy, and I will not be a party to your peril. I propose an alternative. Arrange for Mr. Goodwin to see them, together with you. Being a trained investigator, he knows how to beguile, and the peril, if any, will be his. If they are not available at the moment, arrange it for this evening—but not here. Perhaps one of them has a suitable apartment, or if not, a private room at some restaurant would do. At my expense, of course. Will you?"

It was her turn to make objections, and she had several. But when Wolfe met them, and made it plain that he would accept her as a colleague only if she accepted his alternative, she finally gave in. She would phone to let me know how she was making out with the arrangements. From her manner, when she got up to go, you might have thought she had been shopping for some little item, say a handbag, and had graciously deferred to the opinion of the clerk. After I

graciously escorted her out and saw her descend the seven steps to the sidewalk, I returned to the office and found Wolfe sitting with his eyes closed and his fists planted on the chair arms.

"Even money," I said.

"On what?" he growled.

"On her against the field. She knows damn well who had a good reason and exactly what it was. It was getting too hot for comfort and she decided that the best way to duck was to wish it on some dear friend."

His eyes opened. "She would, certainly. A woman whose conscience has no sting will stop at nothing. But why come to me? Why didn't she cook her own stew and serve it to the police?"

"I don't know, but for a guess she was afraid the cops would get too curious and find out how she had saved her honor and her virtue and tell her mother and father, and father would spank her. Shall I also guess why you proposed your alternative instead of having her bring them here for you?"

"She wouldn't. She said so."

"Of course she would, if you had insisted. That's your guess. Mine is that you're not desperate enough yet to take on five females in a bunch. When you told me to bring the whole

dozen you knew darned well it couldn't be done, not even by me. Okay, I want instructions."

"Later," he muttered, and closed his eyes.

It was on the fourth floor of an old walk-up in the West Nineties near Amsterdam Avenue. I don't know what it had in the way of a kitchen or bedroom—or bedrooms—because the only room I saw was the one we were sitting in. It was medium-sized, and the couch and chairs and rugs had a homey look, the kind of homeyness that furniture gets by being used by a lot of different people for fifty or sixty years. The chair I was on had a wobbly leg, but that's no problem if you keep it in mind and make no sudden shifts. I was more concerned about the spidery little stand at my elbow on which my glass of milk was perched. I can always drink milk and had preferred it to Bubble-Pagne, registered trademark, a dime a bottle, which they were having. It was ten o'clock Wednesday evening.

The hostesses were the redhead with milky skin, Peggy Choate, and the one with big brown eyes and dimples, Nora Jaret, who shared the apartment. Carol Annis, with the fine profile and the corn-silk hair, had been there when

Helen Iacono and I arrived, bringing Lucy Morgan and her throaty voice after detouring our taxi to pick her up at a street corner. They were a very attractive collection, though of course not as decorative as they had been in their ankle-length purple stolas. Girls always look better in uniforms or costumes. Take nurses or elevator girls or Miss Honeydew at a melon festival.

I was now calling her Helen, not that I felt like it, but in the detective business you have to be sociable, of course preserving your honor and virtue. In the taxi, before picking up Lucy Morgan, she told me she had been thinking it over and she doubted if it would be possible to find out which one of them had a good reason to kill Pyle, or thought she had, because Pyle had been so very careful when he had a girl come to his penthouse. The only way would be to get one of them to open up, and Helen doubted if she could get her to, since she would be practically confessing murder. So the best way would be for Helen and me, after spending an evening with them, to talk it over and decide which one was the most likely, and then she would tell Wolfe she had seen her going back to the kitchen and bringing another plate, and Wolfe would tell the

police, and that would do it.

No, I didn't feel like calling her Helen. I would just as soon have been too far away from her to call her at all.

Helen's declared object in arranging the party—declared to them—was to find out from me what Nero Wolfe and the cops had done and were doing, so they would know where they stood. Helen was sure I would loosen up, she had told them, because she had been to see me and found me very nice and sympathetic. So the hostesses were making it sort of restive and intimate by serving Bubble-Pagne, though I preferred milk. I had a suspicion that at least one of them, Lucy Morgan, would have preferred whiskey or gin or rum or vodka, and maybe they all would, but that might have made me suspect that they were not just a bunch of wholesome, hard-working artists.

They didn't look festive. I wouldn't say they were haggard, but much of the bloom was off. And they hadn't bought Helen's plug for me that I was nice and sympathetic. They were absolutely skeptical, sizing me up with sidewise looks, especially Carol Annis, who sat cross-legged on the couch with her head cocked. It was she who asked me, after a few remarks had been made

about how awful it had been and still was, how well I knew the chef and the other man in the kitchen. I told her she could forget Fritz. He was completely above suspicion, and anyway he had been at the range while the plates were taken. As for Zoltan, I said that though I had known him a long while we were not intimate, but that was irrelevant because, granting that he had known which guest each girl would serve, if he poisoned one of the portions and saw that a certain girl got it, why did she or some other girl come back for another plate?

"There's no proof that she did," Carol declared. "Nobody saw her."

"Nobody noticed her." I wasn't aggressive; I was supposed to be nice and sympathetic. "She wouldn't have been noticed leaving the dining room because the attention of the girls who were in there was on Felix and Marjorie Quinn, who had spilled a blini, and the men wouldn't notice her. The only place she would have been noticed was in the corridor through the pantry, and if she met another girl there she could have stopped and been patting her hair or something. Anyhow, one of you must have gone back for a second plate, because when Fern Faber went for hers there wasn't any."

"Why do you say one of us?" Nora demanded. "If you mean one of us here. There were twelve."

"I do mean one of you here, but I'm not saying it, I'm just quoting the police. They think it was one of you here because you were the last five."

"How do you know what they think?"

"I'm not at liberty to say. But I do."

"I know what I think," Carol asserted. She had uncrossed her legs and slid forward on the couch to get her toes on the floor. "I think it was Zoltan. I read in the *Gazette* that he's a chef at Rusterman's, and Nero Wolfe is the trustee and so he's the boss there, and I think Zoltan hated him for some reason and tried to poison him, but he gave the poisoned plate to the wrong girl. Nero Wolfe sat right next to Pyle."

There was no point in telling her that she was simply ignoring the fact that one of them had gone back for a second helping, so I just said, "Nobody can stop you thinking. But I doubt very much if the police would buy that."

"What would they buy?" Peggy asked.

My personal feelings about Peggy were mixed. For: she had recognized me and named me.

Against: she had accused me of liking myself. "Anything that would fit," I told her. "As I said, they think it was one of you five that went back for more, and therefore they have to think that one of you gave the poison to Pyle, because what other possible reason could you have had for serving another portion? They wouldn't buy anything that didn't fit into that. That's what rules out everybody else, including Zoltan." I looked at Carol. "I'm sorry, Miss Annis, but that's how it is."

"They're a bunch of dopes," Lucy Morgan stated. "They get an idea and then they haven't got room for another one." She was on the floor with her legs stretched out, her back against the couch. "I agree with Carol, there's no proof that any of us went back for another plate. That Zoltan said he didn't see anyone come back. Didn't he?"

"He did. He still does."

"Then he's a dope, too. And he said no one took two plates. Didn't he?"

"Right. He still does."

"Then how do they know which one he's wrong about? We were all nervous, you know that. Maybe one of us took two plates instead of one, and when she got to the dining room there she was with an extra, and she got rid of it by giving it to

some guest that didn't have any."

"Then why didn't she say so?" I asked.

"Because she was scared. The way Nero Wolfe came at us was enough to scare anybody. And now she won't say so because she signed a statement and she's even more scared."

I shook my head. "I'm sorry, but if you analyze that you'll see that it won't do. It's very tricky. You can do it the way I did this afternoon. Take twenty-four little pieces of paper, on twelve of them write the names of the guests, and arrange them as they sat at the table. On the other twelve pieces write the names of the twelve girls. Then try to manipulate the twelve girl pieces so that one of them either took in two plates at once, and did not give either of them to Pyle, or went back for a second plate, and did not give either the first one or the second one to Pyle. It can't be done. For if either of those things happened there wouldn't have been one mix-up, there would have been two. Since there was only one mix-up, Pyle couldn't possibly have been served by a girl who neither brought in two plates at once nor went back for a second one. So the idea that a girl innocently brought in two plates is out."

"I don't believe it," Nora said flatly.

"It's not a question of believing." I was still sympathetic. "You might as well say you don't believe two plus two is four. I'll show you. May I have some paper? Any old kind."

She went to a table and brought some, and I took my pen and wrote the twenty-four names, spacing them, and tore the paper into twenty-four pieces. Then I knelt on a rug and arranged the twelve guest pieces in a rectangle as they had sat at table—not that that mattered, since they could have been in a straight line or a circle, but it was plainer that way. The girls gathered around.

"Okay," I said, "show me." I took Quinn and put it back of Leacraft. "There's no argument about that, Marjorie Quinn brought the first plate and gave it to Leacraft. Remember there was just one mix-up, started by Peggy when she saw Pyle had been served and gave hers to Nero Wolfe. Try having any girl bring in a second plate—or bring in two at once if you still think that might have happened—without either serving Pyle or starting a second mix-up."

My memory has had a long stiff training under the strains and pressures Wolfe has put on it, but I wouldn't undertake to report all the combinations

they tried, huddled around me on the floor. They stuck to it for half an hour or more. The most persistent was Peggy Choate, the redhead. After the others had given up she stayed with it, frowning and biting her lip, propped first on one hand and then the other. Finally she said, "Nuts," stretched an arm to make a jumble of all the pieces of paper, guests and girls, got up, and returned to her chair.

"It's just a trick," said Carol Annis, perched on the couch again.

"I still don't believe it," Nora Jaret declared. "I do not believe that one of us deliberately poisoned a man—one of us sitting here." Her big brown eyes were at me. "Good lord, look at us! Point at her! Point her out! I dare you to!"

That, of course, was what I was there for—not exactly to point her out, but at least to get a hint. I had had a vague idea that one might come from watching them maneuver the pieces of paper, but it hadn't. Nor from anything any of them had said. I had been expecting Helen Iacono to introduce the subject of Vincent Pyle's *modus operandi* with girls, but apparently she had decided it was up to me. She hadn't spoken more than twenty words since we arrived.

"If I could point her out," I said, "I wouldn't be bothering the rest of you. Neither would the cops if they could point her out. Sooner or later, of course, they will, but it begins to look as if they'll have to get at it from the other end. Motive. They'll have to find out which one of you had a motive, and they will—sooner or later—and on that maybe I can help. I don't mean help them, I mean help you—not the one who killed him, the rest of you. That thought occurred to me after I learned that Helen Iacono had admitted that she had gone out with Pyle a few times last winter. What if she had said she hadn't? When the police found out she had lied, and they would have, she would have been in for it. It wouldn't have proved she had killed him, but the going would have been mighty rough. I understand that the rest of you have all denied that you ever had anything to do with Pyle. Is that right? Miss Annis?"

"Certainly." Her chin was up. "Of course I had met him. Everybody in show business has. Once when he came backstage at the Coronet, and once at a party somewhere, and one other time—but I don't remember where."

"Miss Morgan?"

She was smiling at me, a

crooked smile. "Do you call this helping us?" she demanded.

"It might lead to that after I know how you stand. After all, the cops have your statement."

She shrugged. "I've been around longer than Carol, so I had seen him to speak to more than she had. Once I danced with him at the Flamingo, two years ago. That was the closest I had ever been to him."

"Miss Choate?"

"I never had the honor. I only came to New York last fall. From Montana. He had been pointed out to me from a distance, but he never chased me."

"Miss Jaret?"

"He was Broadway," she said. "I'm TV."

"Don't the twain ever meet?"

"Oh, sure. All the time at Sardi's. That's the only place I ever saw the great Pyle, and I wasn't with him."

"So there you are," I said, "you're all committed. If one of you poisoned him, and though I hate to say it I don't see any way out of that, that one is lying. But if any of the others are lying, if you saw more of him than you admit, you had better get from under quick. If you don't want to tell the cops tell me, tell me now, and I'll pass it on and say I wormed it out of you. Believe

me, you'll regret it if you don't."

"Archie Goodwin, a girl's best friend," Lucy said. "My bosom pal."

No one else said anything.

"Actually," I asserted, "I *am* your friend, all of you but one. I have a friendly feeling for all pretty girls, especially those who work, and I admire and respect you for being willing to make an honest fifty bucks by coming there yesterday to carry plates of grub to a bunch of finickers. I *am* your friend, Lucy, if you're not the murderer."

I leaned forward, forgetting the wobbly chair leg, but it didn't object. It was about time to put a crimp in Helen's personal project. "Another thing. It's quite possible that one of you *did* see her returning to the kitchen for another plate, and you haven't said so because you don't want to squeal on her. If so, spill it now. The longer this hangs on, the hotter it will get. When it gets so the pressure is too much for you and you decide you have got to tell it, it will be too late. If you go to the cops with it tomorrow they probably won't believe you; they'll figure that you did it yourself and you're trying to squirm out. If you don't want to tell me here and now, in front of her, come with

me down to Nero Wolfe's office and we'll talk it over."

They were exchanging glances, and they were not friendly glances. When I had arrived probably not one of them, excluding the murderer, had believed that a poisoner was present, but now they all did, or at least they thought she might be; and when that feeling takes hold it's goodbye to friendliness. It would have been convenient if I could have detected fear in one of the glances, but fear and suspicion and uneasiness are too much alike on faces to tell them apart.

"You *are* a help," Carol Annis said bitterly. "Now you've got us hating each other. Now everybody suspects everybody."

I had quit being nice and sympathetic. "It's about time," I told her. I glanced at my wrist. "It's not midnight yet. If I've made you all realize that this is no Broadway production, or TV either, and the longer the payoff is postponed the tougher it will be for everybody, I *have* helped." I stood up. "Let's go. I don't say Mr. Wolfe can do it by just snapping his fingers, but he might surprise you. He has often surprised me."

"All right," Nora said. She arose. "Come on. This is getting too damn painful. Come on."

I don't pretend that that was what I had been heading for. I admit that I had just been carried along by my tongue. If I arrived with the gang at midnight and Wolfe had gone to bed, he would almost certainly refuse to play. Even if he were still up, he might refuse to work, just to teach me a lesson, since I had not stuck to my instructions. Those thoughts were at me as Peggy Choate bounced up and Carol Annis started to leave the couch.

But they were wasted. That tussle with Wolfe never came off. A door at the end of the room which had been standing ajar suddenly swung open, and there in its frame was a two-legged figure with shoulders almost as broad as the doorway, and I was squinting at Sergeant Purley Stebbins of Manhattan Homicide West. He moved forward, croaking, "I'm surprised at you, Goodwin. These ladies ought to get some sleep."

Of course I was a monkey. If it had been Stebbins who had made a monkey of me I suppose I would have leaped for a window and dived through. Hitting the pavement from a fourth-story window should be enough to finish a monkey, and life wouldn't be worth living if I had been bamboozled by Purley Stebbins. But obviously it

hadn't been him; it had been Peggy Choate or Nora Jaret, or both; Purley had merely accepted an invitation to come and listen in.

So I kept my face. To say I was jaunty would be stretching it, but I didn't scream or tear my hair. "Greetings," I said heartily. "And welcome. I've been wondering why you didn't join us instead of skulking in there in the dark."

"I'll bet you have." He had come to arm's length and stopped. He turned. "You can relax, ladies." Back to me: "You're under arrest for obstructing justice. Come along."

"In a minute. You've got all night." I moved my head. "Of course Peggy and Nora knew this hero was in there, but I'd—"

"I said come along!" he barked.

"And I said in a minute. I intend to ask a couple of questions. I wouldn't dream of resisting arrest, but I've got leg cramp from kneeling too long and if you're in a hurry you'll have to carry me." I moved my eyes. "I'd like to know if you all knew. Did you, Miss Iacono?"

"Of course not."

"Miss Morgan?"

"No."

"Miss Annis?"

"No, I didn't, but I think

you did." She tossed her head and the corn silk fluttered. "That was contemptible. Saying you wanted to help us, so we would talk, with a policeman listening."

"And then he arrests me?"

"That's just an act."

"I wish it were. Ask your friends Peggy and Nora if I knew—only I suppose you wouldn't believe them. They knew, and they didn't tell you. You'd better all think over everything you said. Okay, Sergeant, the leg cramp's gone."

He actually started a hand for my elbow, but I was moving and it wasn't there. I opened the door to the hall. Of course he had me go first down the three flights; no cop in his senses would descend stairs in front of a dangerous criminal in custody. When we emerged to the sidewalk and he told me to turn left I asked him, "Why not cuffs?"

"Clown if you want to," he croaked.

He flagged a taxi on Amsterdam Avenue, and when we were in and rolling I spoke. "I've been thinking, about laws and liberties and so on. Take false arrest, for instance. And take obstructing justice. If a man is arrested for obstructing justice and it turns out that he didn't obstruct any justice, does that make the arrest false? I

wish I knew more about law. I guess I'll have to ask a lawyer. Nathaniel Parker would know."

It was the mention of Parker, the lawyer Wolfe uses when the occasion calls for one, that got him. He had seen Parker in action.

"They heard you," he said, "and I heard you, and I took some notes. You interfered in a homicide investigation. You quoted the police to them. You told them what the police think, and what they're doing and are going to do. You played a game with them with those pieces of paper to show them exactly how it figures. You tried to get them to tell you things, instead of telling the police, and you were going to take them to Nero Wolfe so he could pry it out of them. And you haven't even got the excuse that Wolfe is representing a client. He hasn't got a client."

"Wrong. He has."

"Like hell he has. Name her."

"Not her, him. Fritz Brenner. He is seeing red because food cooked by him was poisoned and killed a man. It's convenient to have the client living right in the house. You admit that a licensed detective has a right to investigate on behalf of a client."

"I admit nothing."

"That's sensible," I said

approvingly. "You shouldn't. When you're on the stand being sued for false arrest, it would be bad to have it thrown up to you, and it would be two against one because the hackie could testify. Can you hear us, driver?"

"Sure I can hear you," he sang out. "It's very interesting."

"So watch your tongue," I told Purley. "You could get hooked for a year's pay. As for quoting the police, I merely said that they think it was one of those five, and when Cramer told Mr. Wolfe that he didn't say it was confidential. As for telling them what the police think, same comment. As for playing that game with them, why not? As for trying to get them to tell me things, I won't comment on that at all because I don't want to be rude. That must have been a slip of the tongue. If you ask me why I didn't balk there at the apartment and bring up these points then and there, what was the use? You had spoiled the party. They wouldn't have come downtown with me. Also I am saving a buck of Mr. Wolfe's money, since you had arrested me and therefore the taxi fare is on the city of New York. Am I still under arrest?"

"You're damn right you are."

"That may be ill-advised.

"You heard him, driver?"

"Sure I heard him."

"Good. Try to remember it."

We were on Ninth Avenue, stopped at Forty-second Street for a light. When the light changed and we moved, Purley told the hackie to pull over to the curb, and he obeyed. At that time of night there were plenty of gaps. Purley took something from a pocket and showed it to the hackie, and said, "Go get yourself a Coke and come back in ten minutes," and he climbed out and went. Purley turned his head to glare at me.

"I'll pay for the Coke," I offered.

He ignored it. "Lieutenant Rowcliff," he said, "is expecting us at Twentieth Street."

"Fine. Even under arrest, one will get you five that I can make him start stuttering in ten minutes."

"You're not under arrest."

I leaned forward to look at the meter. "Ninety cents. From here on we'll split it."

"Damn it, quit clowning! If you think I'm crawling you're wrong. I just don't see any percentage in it. If I deliver you in custody I know damn well what you'll do. You'll clam up. We won't get a peep out of you, and in the morning you'll make a phone call and Parker will

come. What will that get us?"

I could have said, "A suit for false arrest," but I made it, "Only the pleasure of my company."

There was one point of resemblance between Purley and Carol Annis, just one: no sense of humor. "But," he said, "Lieutenant Rowcliff is expecting you, and you're a material witness in a homicide case, and you were up there working on the suspects."

"You could arrest me as a material witness," I suggested.

He uttered a word that I was glad the hackie wasn't there to hear, and added, "You'd clam up and in the morning you'd be out on bail. I know it's after midnight, but the lieutenant is expecting you."

He's a proud man, Purley is, and I wouldn't go so far as to say that he has nothing to be proud of. He's not a bad cop, as cops go. It was a temptation to keep him dangling for a while, to see how long it would take him to bring himself to the point of coming right out and asking for it, but it was late and I needed some sleep.

"You realize," I said, "that it's a waste of time and energy. You can tell him everything we said, and if he tried to go into other aspects with me I'll only start making cracks and he'll start stuttering. It's useless."

"Yeah, I know, but—"

"But the lieutenant expects me."

He nodded. "It was him Nora Jaret told about it, and he sent me. The Inspector wasn't around."

"Okay. In the interest of justice I'll give him an hour. That's understood? Exactly one hour."

"It's not understood with me." He was emphatic. "When we get there you're his and he's welcome to you. I don't know if he can stand you for an hour."

At noon the next day, Thursday, Fritz stood at the end of Wolfe's desk, consulting with him on a major point of policy: whether to switch to another source of supply for watercress. The quality had been below par, which for them means perfection, for nearly a week. I was at my desk, yawning. It had been after two o'clock when I got home from my chat with Lieutenant Rowcliff, and with nine hours' sleep in two nights I was way behind.

The hour since Wolfe had come down at eleven o'clock from his morning session with the orchids had been spent, most of it, by me reporting and Wolfe listening. My visit with Rowcliff needed only a couple

of sentences, since the only detail of any importance was that it had taken me eight minutes to get him stuttering, but Wolfe wanted my conversation with the girls verbatim, and also my impressions and conclusions. I told him my basic conclusion was that the only way she could be nailed, barring a stroke of luck, would be by a few dozen men sticking to the routine—her getting the poison and her connection with Pyle.

"And," I added, "her connection with Pyle may be hopeless. In fact, it probably is. If it's Helen Iacono, what she told us is no help. If what she told us is true she had no reason to kill him, and if it isn't true how are you going to prove it? If it's one of the others she is certainly no halfwit, and there may be absolutely nothing to link her up. Being very careful with visitors to your penthouse is fine as long as you're alive, but it has its drawbacks if one of them feeds you arsenic."

He was regarding me without enthusiasm. "You are saying in effect that it must be left to the police. I don't have a few dozen men. I can expose her only by a stroke of luck."

"Right. Or a stroke of genius. That's your department. I make no conclusions about genius."

"Then why the devil were you going to bring them to me at midnight? Don't answer. I know. To badger me."

"No, sir. I told you. I had got nowhere with them. I had got them looking at each other out of the corners of their eyes, but that was all. I kept on talking, and suddenly I heard myself inviting them to come home with me. I was giving them the excuse that I wanted them to discuss it with you, but that may have been just a cover for certain instincts that a man is entitled to. They are very attractive girls—all but one."

"Which one?"

"That's what we're working on."

He probably would have harped on it if Fritz hadn't entered to present the water-cress problem. As they wrestled with it, dealing with it from all angles, I swiveled my back to them so I could do my yawning in private. Finally they got it settled, deciding to give the present source one more week and then switch if the quality didn't improve; and then I heard Fritz say, "There's another matter, sir. Felix phoned me this morning. He and Zoltan would like an appointment with you after lunch, and I would like to be present. They suggested half past two."

"What is it?" Wolfe demanded. "Something wrong at the restaurant?"

"No, sir. Concerning the misfortune of Tuesday evening."

"What about it?"

"It would be better for them to tell you. It is their concern."

I swiveled for a view of Fritz's face. Had Felix and Zoltan been holding out on us? Fritz's expression didn't tell me, but it did tell Wolfe something: that it would be unwise for him to insist on knowing the nature of Felix's and Zoltan's concern because Fritz had said all he intended to. There is no one more obliging than Fritz, but also there is no one more immovable when he has taken a stand. So Wolfe merely said that half past two would be convenient. When Fritz had left I offered to go to the kitchen and see if I could pry it out of him, but Wolfe said no, apparently it wasn't urgent.

As it turned out, it wasn't. Wolfe and I were still in the dining room, with coffee, when the doorbell rang at 2:25 and Fritz answered it, and when we crossed the hall to the office Felix was in the red leather chair, Zoltan was in one of the yellow ones, and Fritz was standing. Fritz had removed his apron and put on a jacket,

which was quite proper. People do not attend business conferences in aprons.

When we had exchanged greetings, and Fritz had been told to sit down and had done so, and Wolfe and I had gone to our desks, Felix spoke. "You won't mind, Mr. Wolfe, if I ask a question? Before I say why we requested an appointment?"

Wolfe told him no, go ahead.

"Because," Felix said, "we would like to know this first. We are under the impression that the police are making no progress. They haven't said so, they tell us nothing, but we have the impression. Is it true?"

"It was true at two o'clock this morning, twelve hours ago. They may have learned something by now, but I doubt it."

"Do you think they will soon make progress? That they will soon be successful?"

"I don't know. I can only conjecture. Archie thinks that unless they have a stroke of luck the inquiry will be long and laborious, and even then may fail. I'm inclined to agree with him."

Felix nodded. "That is what we fear—Zoltan and I and others at the restaurant. It is causing a most regrettable atmosphere. A few of our most desirable patrons make jokes, but most of them do not, and some of them do not come. We

do not blame them. For the maitre d'hotel and one of our chefs to assist at a dinner where a guest is served poison—that is not pleasant. If the—"

"Confound it, Felix! I have avowed my responsibility. I have apologized. Are you here for the gloomy satisfaction of reproaching me?"

"No, sir." He was shocked. "Of course not. We came to say that if the poisoner is not soon discovered, and then the affair will be forgotten, the effect on the restaurant may be serious. And if the police are making no progress that may happen, so we appeal to you. We wish to engage your professional services. We know that with you there would be no question. You would solve it quickly and completely. We know it wouldn't be proper to pay you from restaurant funds, since you are the trustee, so we'll pay you with our own money. There was a meeting of the staff last night, and all will contribute, in a proper ratio. We appeal to you."

Zoltan stretched out a hand, arm's length. "We appeal to you," he said.

"Pfui," Wolfe grunted.

He had my sympathy. Not only was their matter-of-fact confidence in his prowess highly flattering, but also their appealing instead of demanding,

since he had got them into it, was extremely touching. But a man with a long-standing reputation for being hard and blunt simply can't afford the softer feelings, no matter what the provocation. It called for great self-control.

Felix and Zoltan exchanged looks. "He said 'pfui,'" Zoltan told Felix.

"I heard him," Felix snapped. "I have ears."

Fritz spoke. "I wished to be present," he said, "so I could add my appeal to theirs. I offered to contribute, but they said no."

Wolfe took them in, his eyes going right to left and back again. "This is preposterous," he declared. "I said 'pfui' not in disgust but in astonishment. I am solely to blame for this mess, but you offer to pay me to clean it up. Preposterous! You should know that I have already bestirred myself. Archie?"

"Yes, sir. At least you have bestirred me."

He skipped it. "And," he told them, "your coming is opportune. Before lunch I was sitting here considering the situation, and I concluded that the only way to manage the affair with dispatch is to get the wretch to betray herself; and I conceived a plan. For it I need your cooperation. Yours, Zol-

tan. Your help is essential. Will you give it? I appeal to you."

Zoltan upturned his palms and raised his shoulders. "But yes! But how?"

"It is complicated. Also it will require great dexterity and aplomb. How are you on the telephone? Some people are not themselves, not entirely at ease, when they are phoning. A few are even discomfited. Are you?"

"No." He reflected. "I don't think so. No."

"If you are it won't work. The plan requires that you telephone five of those women this afternoon. You will first call Miss Iacono, tell her who you are, and ask her to meet you somewhere—in some, obscure restaurant. You will say that on Tuesday evening, when you told me that you had not seen one of them return for a second plate, you were upset and flustered by what had happened, and later, when the police questioned you, you were afraid to contradict yourself and tell the truth. But now that the notoriety is harming the restaurant you feel that you may have to reveal the fact that you did see her return for a second plate, but that before—"

"But I didn't!" Zoltan cried.

"*Tais-toi!*" Felix snapped at him.

Wolfe resumed. "—but that before you do so you wish to discuss it with her. You will say that one reason you have kept silent is that you have been unable to believe that anyone as attractive and charming as she is could be guilty of such a crime. A parenthesis. I should have said at the beginning that you must not try to parrot my words. I am giving you only the substance; the words must be your own, those you would naturally use. You understand that?"

"Yes, sir." Zoltan's hands were clasped tight.

"So don't try to memorize my words. Your purpose is to get her to agree to meet you. She will of course assume that you intend to blackmail her, but you will not say so. You will try to give her the impression, in everything you say and in your tone of voice, that you will not demand money from her, but will expect her favors. In short, that you desire her. I can't tell you how to convey that impression; I must leave that to you. The only requisite is that she must be convinced that if she refuses to meet you, you will go at once to the police and tell them the truth."

"Then you know," Zoltan said. "Then she is guilty."

"Not at all. I haven't the

slightest idea who is guilty. When you have finished with her you will phone the other four and repeat the performance—Miss Choate, Miss Annis, Miss—"

"My God, Mr. Wolfe! That's impossible!"

"Not impossible, merely difficult. You alone can do it, for they know your voice. I considered having Archie do it, imitating your voice, but it would be too risky. You said you would help, but there's no use trying it if the bare idea appalls you. Will you undertake it?"

"I don't . . . I would . . ."

"He will," Felix said. "He is like that. He only needs to swallow it. He will do it well. But I must ask, can he be expected to get them all to agree to meet him? The guilty one, yes, but the others?"

"Certainly not. There is much to discuss and arrange. The innocent ones will react variously according to their tempers. One or more of them will probably inform the police, and I must provide for that contingency with Mr. Cramer." To Zoltan: "Since it is possible that one of the innocent ones will agree to meet you, for some unimaginable reason, you will have to give them different hours for the appointments. There are many details to settle,

but that is mere routine. The key is you. You must of course rehearse, and into a telephone transmitter. There are several stations on the house phone. You will go to Archie's room and speak from there. We will listen at the other stations: Archie in the plant rooms, I in my room, Fritz in the kitchen, and Felix here. Archie will handle the other end of the conversation; he is much better qualified than I to improvise the responses of young women.

"Do you want me to repeat the substance of what you are to say before rehearsal?"

Zoltan opened his mouth and closed it again.

"Yes," he said.

Sergeant Purley Stebbins shifted his fanny for the nth time in two hours. "She's not coming," he muttered. "It's nearly eight o'clock." His chair was about half big enough for his personal dimensions.

We were squeezed in a

corner of the kitchen of John Piotti's little restaurant on 14th Street between Second and Third Avenues. On the midget table between us were two notebooks, his and mine, and a small metal case. Of the three cords extending from the case, the two in front went to the earphones we had on, and the one at the back ran down the wall, through the floor, along the basement ceiling toward the front, back up through the floor, and on through a table top, where it was connected to a microphone hidden in a bowl of artificial flowers. The installation, a rush order, had cost Wolfe \$191.67. Permission to have it made had cost nothing because he had once got John Piotti out of a difficulty and hadn't soaked him.

"We'll have to hang on," I said. "You never can tell with a redhead."

The exposed page of my notebook was blank, but Purley had written on his. As follows:

Helen Iacono	6:00 p.m.
Peggy Choate	7:30 p.m.
Carol Annis	9:00 p.m.
Lucy Morgan	10:30 p.m.
Nora Jaret	12:00 p.m.

It was in my head. If I had had to write it down I would certainly have made one "p.m." do.

"Anyhow," Purley said, "we know damn well who it is."

"Don't count your poisoners," I said, "before they're

hatched." It was pretty feeble, but I was still short on sleep.

I hoped to heaven he was right, since otherwise the operation was a flop. So far everything had been fine. After half an hour of rehearsing, Zoltan had been wonderful. He had made the five calls from the extension in my room, and when he was through I told him his name should be in lights on a Broadway marquee. The toughest job had been getting Inspector Cramer to agree to Wolfe's terms, but he had no good answer to Wolfe's argument that if he insisted on changing the rules Zoltan wouldn't play. So Purley was in the kitchen with me, Cramer was with Wolfe in the office, prepared to stay for dinner, Zoltan was at the restaurant table with the hidden mike, and two homicide dicks, one male and one female, were at another table twenty feet away. One of the most elaborate charades Nero Wolfe had ever staged.

Purley was right when he said we knew who it was, but I was right, too—she hadn't been hatched yet. The reactions to Zoltan's calls had settled it. Helen Iacono had been indignant and after a couple of minutes had hung up on him, and had immediately phoned the District Attorney's office. Peggy Choate had let him finish

his spiel and then called him a liar, but she had not said definitely that she wouldn't meet him, and the D.A. or police hadn't heard from her. Carol Annis, after he had spoken his lines, had used only ten words: "Where can I meet you?" and, after he had told her where and when: "All right, I'll be there." Lucy Morgan had coaxed him along, trying to get him to fill it all in on the phone, had finally said she would keep the appointment, and then had rushed downtown and rung our doorbell, told me her tale, demanded that I accompany her to the rendezvous, and insisted on seeing Wolfe. I had to promise to go to get rid of her. Nora Jaret had called him assorted names, from liar on up, or on down, and had told him she had a friend listening in on an extension, which was almost certainly a lie. Neither we nor the law had had a peep from her.

So it was Carol Annis with the corn-silk hair, that was plain enough, but there was no salt on her tail. If she was really smart and really tough she might decide to sit tight and not come, figuring that when they came at her with Zoltan's story she would say he was either mistaken or lying, and we would be up a stump. If she was dumb and only fairly tough she

might scam. Of course they would find her and haul her back, but if she said Zoltan was lying and she had run because she thought she was being framed, again we would be up a stump. But if she was both smart and tough but not quite enough of either, she would turn up at nine o'clock and join Zoltan. From there on it would be up to him, but that had been rehearsed, too, and after his performance on the phone I thought he would deliver.

At half past eight Purley said, "She's not coming," and removed his earphone.

"I never thought she would," I said. The "she" was of course Peggy Choate, whose hour had been 7:30. "I said you never can tell with a redhead merely to make conversation."

Purley signaled to Piotti, who had been hovering around most of the time, and he brought us a pot of coffee and two fresh cups. The minutes were snails, barely moving. When we had emptied the cups I poured more. At 8:48 Purley put his earphone back on. At 8:56 I asked, "Shall I do a countdown?"

"You'd clown in the hot seat," he muttered, so hoarse that it was barely words. He always gets hoarser as the tension grows; that's the only sign.

It was four minutes past nine when the phone brought me the sound of a chair scraping, then faintly Zoltan's voice saying good evening, and then a female voice, but I couldn't get the words.

"Not loud enough," Purley whispered hoarsely.

"Shut up." I had my pen out. "They're standing up."

There came the sound of chairs scraping, and other little sounds, and then:

Zoltan: Will you have a drink?

Carol: No. I don't want anything.

Zoltan: Won't you eat something?

Carol: I don't feel . . . maybe I will.

Purley and I exchanged glances. That was promising. That sounded as if we might get more than conversation.

Another female voice, belonging to Mrs. Piotti: We have good Osso Buco, madame. Very good. A specialty.

Carol: No, not meat.

Zoltan: A sweet perhaps?

Carol: No.

Zoltan: It is more friendly if we eat. The spaghetti with anchovy sauce is excellent. I had some.

Carol: You had some?

I bit my lip, but he handled it fine.

Zoltan: I've been here half

an hour, I wanted so much to see you. I thought I should order something, and I tried that. I might even eat another portion.

Carol: You should know good food. All right.

Mrs. Piotti: Two spaghetti anchovy. Wine? A very good Chianti?

Carol: No. Coffee.

Pause.

Zoltan: You are more lovely without a veil, but the veil is good, too. It makes me want to see behind it. Of course I—

Carol: You have seen behind it, Mr. Mahany.

Zoltan: Ah! You know my name?

Carol: It was in the paper.

Zoltan: I am not sorry that you know it, I want you to know my name, but it will be nicer if you call me Zoltan.

Carol: I might someday. It will depend. I certainly won't call you Zoltan if you go on thinking what you said on the phone. You're mistaken, Mr. Mahany. You didn't see me go back for another plate, because I didn't. I can't believe you would tell a vicious lie about me, so I just think you're mistaken.

Mrs. Piotti, in the kitchen for the spaghetti, came to the corner to stoop and whisper into my free ear, "She's wearing a veil."

Zoltan: I am not mistaken, my dear. That is useless. I know. How could I be mistaken when the first moment I saw you I felt . . . but I will not try to tell you how I felt. If any of the others had come and taken another plate I would have stopped her, but not you. Before you I was dumb. So it is useless.

Needing only one hand for my pen, I used the free one to blow a kiss to Purley.

Carol: I see. So you're sure.

Zoltan: I am, my dear. Very sure.

Carol: But you haven't told the police.

Zoltan: Of course not.

Carol: Have you told Nero Wolfe or Archie Goodwin?

Zoltan: I have told no one. How could I tell anyone? Mr. Wolfe is sure that the one who returned for another plate is the one who killed that man, gave him poison, and Mr. Wolfe is always right. So it is terrible for me. Could I tell anyone that I know you killed a man? You? How could I? That is why I had to see you, to talk with you. If you weren't wearing that veil I could look into your beautiful eyes. I think I know what I would see there. I would see suffering and sorrow. I saw that in your eyes Tuesday evening. I know he made you suffer. I know you wouldn't kill a man

unless you had to. That is why—

The voice stopped. That was understandable, since Mrs. Piotti had gone through the door with the spaghetti and coffee and had had time to reach their table. Assorted sounds came as she served them.

Purley muttered, "He's overdoing it," and I muttered back, "No. He's perfect." Piotti came over and stood looking down at my notebook. It wasn't until after Mrs. Piotti was back in the kitchen that Carol's voice came.

Carol: That's why I am wearing the veil, Zoltan, because I know it's in my eyes. You're right. I had to. He did make me suffer. He ruined my life.

Zoltan: No, my dear. Your life is not ruined. No! No matter what he did. Was he . . . did he . . .

I was biting my lip again. Why didn't he give them the signal? The food had been served and presumably they were eating. He had been told that it would be pointless to try to get her to give him any details of her relations with Pyle, since they would almost certainly be lies. Why didn't he give the signal? Her voice was coming:

Carol: He promised to marry me. I'm only twenty-two years old, Zoltan. I didn't think I would ever let a man touch me

again, but the way you . . . I don't know. I'm glad you know I killed him because it will be better now, to know that somebody knows. To know that you know. Yes, I had to kill him, I *had* to, because if I didn't I would have had to kill myself. Someday I may tell you what a fool I was, how I— Oh!

Zoltan: What? What's the matter?

Carol: My bag. I left it in my car. Out front. And I didn't lock the car. A blue Plymouth hardtop. Would you . . . I'll go . . .

Zoltan: I'll get it.

The sound came of his chair scraping, then faintly his footsteps, and then silence. But the silence was broken in ten seconds, whereas it would have taken him much longer to go for the purse and return. What broke it was a male voice saying, "I'm an officer of the law, Miss Annis," and a noise from Carol. Purley, shedding his earphone, jumped up and went, and I followed, notebook in hand.

It was quite a tableau. The male dick stood with a hand on Carol's shoulder. Carol sat stiff, her chin up, staring straight ahead. The female dick, not much older than Carol, stood facing her from across the table, holding with both hands, at breast level, a plate of spaghetti.

She spoke to Purley. "She put something in it and then stuck something in her dress. I saw her in my mirror."

I moved in. After all, I was in charge, under the terms Cramer had agreed to. "Thank you, Miss Annis," I said. "You were a help. On a signal from Zoltan they were going to start a commotion to give him an excuse to leave the table, but you saved them the trouble. I thought you'd like to know. Come on, Zoltan. All over. According to plan."

He had entered and stopped three paces off, a blue handbag under his arm. As he moved toward us Purley put out a hand. "I'll take that."

Cramer was in the red leather chair. Carol Annis was in a yellow one facing Wolfe's desk, with Purley on one side of her and his female colleague on the other. The male colleague had been sent to the laboratory with the plate of spaghetti and a small roll of paper that had been fished from inside Carol's dress. Fritz, Felix, and Zoltan were on the couch near the end of my desk.

"I will not pretend," Miss Annis," Wolfe was saying. "One reason that I persuaded Mr. Cramer to have you brought here first on your way to limbo was that I needed to appease

my rancor. You had injured and humiliated not only me, but also one of my most valued friends, Fritz Brenner, and two other men whom I esteem, and I had arranged the situation that gave you your opportunity; and I wished them to witness your own humiliation, contrived by me in my presence."

"That's enough of that," Cramer growled.

Wolfe ignored him. "I admit the puerility of that reason, Miss Annis, but in candor I wanted to acknowledge it. A better reason was that I wished to ask you a few questions. You took such prodigious risks that it is hard to believe in your sanity, and it would give me no satisfaction to work vengeance on a mad-woman. What would you have done if Felix's eyes had been on you when you entered with the plate of poison and went to Mr. Pyle? Or if, when you returned to the kitchen for a second plate, Zoltan had challenged you? What would you have done?"

No answer. Apparently she was holding her gaze straight at Wolfe, but from my angle it was hard to tell because she still had the veil on. Asked by Cramer to remove it, she had refused. When the female dick had extracted the roll of paper from inside Carol's dress she had asked Cramer if she should pull

the veil off and Cramer had said no. No rough stuff.

There was no question about Wolfe's gaze at her. He was forward in his chair, his palms flat on his desk. He persisted. "Will you answer me, Miss Annis?"

She wouldn't.

"Are you a lunatic, Miss Annis?"

She wasn't saying.

Wolfe's head jerked to me. "Is she deranged, Archie?"

That was unnecessary. When we're alone I don't particularly mind his insinuations that I presume to be an authority on women, but there was company present. I gave him a look and snapped, "No comment."

He returned to her. "Then that must wait. I leave to the police such matters as your procurement of the poison and your relations with Mr. Pyle, mentioning only that you cannot now deny possession of arsenic, since you used it a second time this evening. It will unquestionably be found in the spaghetti and in the roll of paper you concealed in your dress; and so, manifestly, if you are mad you are also ruthless and malevolent. You may have been intolerably provoked by Mr. Pyle, but not by Zoltan. He presented himself not as a nemesis, but as a bewitched champion. He offered his homage,

making no demands, and your counter-offer was death."

"You lie," Carol said. "And he lied. He was going to lie about me. He didn't see me go back for a second plate, but he was going to say he did. And you lie. He did make demands. He threatened me."

Wolfe's brows went up. "Then you haven't been told?"

"Told what?"

"That you were overheard. That is the other question I had for you. I have no apology for contriving the trap, but you deserve to know you are in its jaws. All that you and Zoltan said was heard by two men at the other end of a wire in another room, and they recorded it—Mr. Stebbins of the police, now at your left, and Mr. Goodwin."

"You lie," she said.

"No, Miss Annis. This isn't the trap; it has already been sprung. You have it, Mr. Stebbins?"

Purley nodded. He hates to answer questions from Wolfe.

"Archie?"

"Yes, sir."

"Did Zoltan threaten her or make demands?"

"No, sir. He followed instructions."

He returned to Carol. "Now you know. I wanted to make sure of that. To finish, since you may have had a just and

weighty grievance against Mr. Pyle, I would myself prefer to see you made to account for your attempt to kill Zoltan, but that is not in my discretion. In any case, my rancor is appeased, and I hold—"

"That's enough," Cramer blurted, leaving his chair. "I didn't agree to let you preach at her all night. Bring her along, Sergeant."

As Purley arose a voice came. "May I say something?" It was Fritz. Heads turned as he

left the couch and moved, detouring around Zoltan's feet and Purley's bulk to get to Carol, and turning to stand looking down at her.

"On account of what Mr. Wolfe said," he told her. "He said you injured me, and that is true. It is also true that I wanted him to find you. I can't speak for Felix, and you tried to kill Zoltan and I can't speak for him, but I can speak for myself. I forgive you."

"You lie," Carol said.



NEVER PUBLISHED BEFORE

Edward D. Hoch

Captain Leopold Saves a Life

Why would anyone want to kidnap a mediocre prizefighter? In uncovering the truth, Captain Leopold of the Violent Crimes Division and Fletcher, his lieutenant, encounter pornographic movies and murder. And that's only on the face of it . . .

Detective: CAPTAIN LEOPOLD

Captain Leopold's heel hit the flimsy door just above the lock and it sprang open with a sharp crack that startled the two men at the table. One of them grabbed for the revolver at his elbow and Leopold fired, sending him toppling backward with a bullet in the shoulder. The other man bounded from the table, running toward the bedroom.

When Leopold reached the doorway, he saw the man had grabbed up a hunting knife and lunged for the bed, where Sammy Clark was tied and helpless. There was no time for a fancy shot. Leopold killed the man with a bullet through the temple.

He glanced back into the living room, making certain the

wounded man hadn't tried to retrieve his weapon, and then put his own gun away. He could hear the police sirens in the distance, responding to his call, and for the first time in twenty minutes he felt able to relax. He was growing too old for this.

He turned his attention to Sammy Clark and cut quickly through his bonds with the hunting knife. When the handkerchief gag came out of his mouth, Sammy coughed and said, "You saved my life, Captain."

"Anything for a friend, Sammy."

The man on the bed was a small-time boxer, with the broad shoulders and bulging muscles of someone who had spent a lifetime caring for his

body. Leopold had seen him around downtown for years, and they'd had a couple of drinks together on occasion.

"They were going to kill me after dark and dump my body in the Sound," Sammy told him. He glanced down at the dead man. "This one's Frank Esters."

"I know. That's how I found you. One of the men at the gym recognized him when they kidnaped you."

"The other is Yance McGuire. Is he dead, too?"

Leopold glanced through the doorway. McGuire was rolling on the floor in pain. "No, just wounded."

There were running footsteps on the stairs and Lieutenant Fletcher came through the doorway, his service revolver drawn. "I see you had a little trouble. We came as fast as we could." He put away his revolver as the others tended to the wounded man. "You all right, Captain?"

"Fine, Fletcher. Get an ambulance for that one. The one in here is all finished."

Fletcher stared in at Sammy Clark. "The missing boxer?"

Leopold nodded. Other men were coming in now, stepping over the twisted body on the floor. "I got lucky. I recognized Esters at a liquor store on Oak Street and followed him back

here. That's when I called you. But I was afraid they'd kill Clark as soon as they realized they were cornered, so I came in after him alone."

"That was a darn crazy thing to do," Fletcher decided.

"It was a one-man operation and it worked."

"Damn right it did," Sammy Clark insisted. "I owe you my life."

"Why did they kidnap you and try to kill you, Sammy?" Leopold asked.

"I had a business deal with them," the muscular man answered. "They came to the gym where I was working out and jumped me in the dressing room. McGuire KO'd me with a pistol butt. When I came to, I was tied to the bed here."

"Why didn't they just gun you down at the gym?" Fletcher asked. "It would have been a lot safer."

Sammy Clark ran his tongue over his lips. "They wanted something from me first."

"Will you talk about it?" Leopold asked him.

"You saved my life. I guess you deserve to hear the story. But not here—and just the two of us, Captain."

Leopold nodded. "Take care of things here, Fletcher."

"All right, Captain." Fletcher glanced at the broken door. "But go easy after this,

will you?" he added, lowering his voice. "You're no kid any more."

"None of us are, Fletcher. I'll see you later."

He drove Sammy Clark to headquarters and took him to his office at the rear of the second floor. Settling into a worn leather chair, the boxer remarked, "This place smells like a gym."

Leopold smiled. "The city is building a new public safety building as soon as they get some money from the state. But I guess this place is like home to me—I don't notice the smell any more." He pulled a pad and pencil within easy reach. "Now suppose you tell me about it, Sammy."

The man opposite him twisted nervously in his chair. "It's not the kind of thing I like to talk about."

"Somebody wanted you to throw a fight?"

"Who in hell would ever pay me to throw a fight? I lose 'em all anyway."

"Then what?"

Sammy stared hard at the floor and answered. "I made a movie."

"A what?"

"A movie. With a girl. You know."

At last it dawned on Leopold. "A sex film?"

"Well . . . yeah, I guess you'd

call it that. McGuire had this movie camera and all these lights, and we shot it at his apartment. They came to me about six months ago and suggested it. Esters said they'd pay me a thousand dollars because they liked my muscles."

"Had they made other films like that?"

"Sure, they been making 'em for a year or two. Just silents at first, to sell in New York and L.A., but when things started opening up they got into features for some of the cheap theaters. Most cities have 'em now, and most of the time the cops don't bother to raid them."

"So you made one of these films for McGuire and Esters."

"Yeah. It was a thousand bucks, you know?" He was still embarrassed, still avoiding Leopold's eyes. "But then after it was over I changed my mind."

"Why was that?"

"Ah, hell—this girl they got was too nice. She was just a kid who didn't know what she was gettin' into. Only nineteen and from someplace out in Ohio. Some little town. She cried all the time between scenes. She was a nice kid."

"If she was that nice, what was she doing with Esters and McGuire?"

"Her boyfriend back in Ohio got her pregnant and she went

to New York for an abortion. I guess Esters picked her up there and brought her here. She needed money and he talked her into it."

Leopold sighed. He heard the story, with variations, too many times. The girl was probably out on the street by now, working as a prostitute. "What's her name?"

"I don't want to get her involved. She's out of it."

"We'll see. Tell me the rest."

"Well, I went to McGuire last week and told him I'd give him his thousand back if he'd destroy the negative and prints. He said no, and I guess I lost my temper. I beat him up a little and took the films. He'd only had time to make a single print of it, so I took that and the negative from his dark-room."

"So the reason they didn't kill you right away was that they were trying to get the films back?"

"I guess so. While they had me tied up they kept askin' where I'd hidden them. But I didn't steal them to keep, only to destroy."

"And did you destroy them?"

He nodded. "I burned them last Tuesday night, right after I got them from McGuire's place."

Leopold doodled on his pad,

thinking about it. "What's the girl's name?" he asked again.

"Why do you have to know?"

"Pornographers don't usually go in for kidnaping and murder, Sammy. If Esters hadn't been recognized at the gym, and if I hadn't spotted him at that liquor store this afternoon, you'd be dead now. That sounds like more than just a sex film to me."

"Honest, Captain—that's all I know!"

"I believe you. I just want to look into it a bit further."

"But the girl . . ."

"The girl could come from a wealthy family. Maybe they wanted the film for blackmail and you messed up their plans."

His mouth hung open. "I never thought of anything like that."

"What's her name?"

"Judy Spanger. She's working at the Archway Candy Store on Main Street."

Leopold nodded. "I'll talk to her. Thank you for coming down, Sammy."

"You get the thanks, Captain. God—when I saw that knife comin' at me I thought it was all over! You really saved my life."

"All in the line of duty," Leopold told him, feeling uncomfortable.

"Well, anyway, if there's

ever anything I can do for you in return, Captain . . . if you ever need anybody beat up and the law can't do it, just come to me."

"What?"

"You know, Captain. Everybody needs help once in a while. If you ever need help, remember Sammy Clark. I'm your friend for life."

Leopold cleared his throat. "I'll remember, Sammy. Thanks again for coming down."

The girl behind the counter at the Archway shop was blonde and slim, with big blue eyes that seemed to bore a hole straight through him. Somehow Leopold was sure who she was before he asked her name. "Judy Spanger?"

"That's me. What is it?"

"Captain Leopold, Violent Crimes Squad. Could I talk to you somewhere privately?"

"Well . . ." Her eyes were immediately alive, like a frightened bird seeking escape. She glanced toward the back room, where another clerk was busy boxing chocolates. "Sue, I'm going to take my coffee break. Okay?"

"Don't be too long," the other girl cautioned. "I'm taking an early lunch."

Over coffee in the narrow lunch counter down the block, Leopold came directly to the

point. "Perhaps you saw in the morning paper that a man named Frank Esters was killed by police last night, and a second man—Yance McGuire—was wounded and taken into custody. He's to be charged today with kidnaping and attempted murder in connection with the abduction of a boxer named Sammy Clark. Do those names mean anything to you?"

"No. Should they?"

Leopold saw that he was going to have trouble. "I'll be frank, Miss Spanger—we know all about your film career. Sammy Clark told us the full story."

She blushed and looked away. "That was months ago, when I was desperate for money. I thought it was all over and done with."

"Did you ever see the completed film?"

"No. I don't go near those people."

"Sammy Clark says he took the films from McGuire and destroyed them."

"I hope so. I never want anyone to see them."

"Have you seen Clark since the filming?"

"Look, Captain—that was a couple of nights last year. I did it for the money, and when it was over I left that place and took a hot shower and cried myself to sleep for three nights

straight. I've never seen any of them since."

"Has any attempt been made to blackmail you because of the films?"

"Who'd want to blackmail me? I make \$82.50 a week."

"Would they be likely to blackmail your parents?"

"My father's dead. I haven't seen my mother since I left home. She has no money and, if she did have, she'd never spend it to bail me out." The voice was bitter, the words hard. Leopold remembered the abortion she had come east for. "I have to be getting back now, if you'll excuse me."

"Just a few more questions, please, Miss Spanger. You have to realize this is a serious matter."

She settled back. "All right."

"Who else was in this film besides you and Clark?"

"Just Frank Esters in a few scenes. McGuire filmed it. Mostly it was just Sammy and me."

"Was anybody else present during the filming?"

"Just Mr. Quiston. He was like the producer—he put up the money."

"Quiston?" Leopold made a note of the name. "Where could I find him?"

"I don't know. I never saw any of them again."

Leopold finished his coffee and stood up. "Thank you, Miss

Spanger. You've been a help. I hope I won't have to bother you again."

Yance McGuire was in the prison infirmary, sitting up in bed with one ankle linked by a chain to the metal leg. His shoulder wore a massive bandage but otherwise he seemed in good health. He stared at Leopold for a moment, trying to remember, and then said, "You're the cop who shot me."

"That's right, Yance. Captain Leopold's the name. How's the shoulder?"

"Not bad. You're a bum shot."

"I hit what I was aiming for."

"Yeah? Well, if I'd hit what I was aiming for, you wouldn't have a head."

Leopold pulled up a chair and sat down. "Why'd you and Esters kidnap Sammy Clark from the gym?"

McGuire shrugged his shoulders. "Maybe you should ask Esters."

"You know he's dead."

"So? You killed him, didn't you? Don't come to me with your troubles, cop."

"I know all about the sex movies, Yance."

"Good for you!"

"I want a man named Quiston. Where do I find him?"

"Never heard the name."

"Cut the comedy, Yance. Quiston was your bankroller in the stag movie business. I want him."

The wounded man merely shook his head. "You've come to the wrong place."

"We'll find him without your help."

"Go ahead."

Leopold gave up and left Yance McGuire chained to his bed.

The following morning, Fletcher came in with coffee. It was a routine they'd followed almost every day for years and it gave Leopold a break in the day's routine that he thoroughly enjoyed. "How's it going, Fletcher? Anything on that name I gave you yesterday? Quiston?"

The lieutenant slipped easily into his favorite chair. "There's a man named Ralph Quiston, lives down along the Sound. He's in the sports film business—furnishes horserace movies to private clubs so they can place bets on the outcome."

"Is that legal?"

"In most states it is. All in fun, you know. Anyway, he looks like our boy. The name, plus the movie connection, is too much for a coincidence."

Leopold agreed. "What else do you know about him?"

"Nothing much. He's di-

vorced and lives alone in a big fancy house about halfway between here and Bridgeport. I've got the address."

"Fine. It's a nice day for a ride."

The June sun was almost directly overhead as Leopold drove into the paved driveway of Ralph Quiston's house overlooking Long Island Sound. The house was of Moorish styling, with a rich pink stucco facade. Leopold looked it over and then rang the doorbell.

When there was no answer by the fourth ring, he walked over and peered through the window of the two-car garage. A car was inside. Leopold returned to the house and tried the bell again. He looked down the hill toward the nearest house, some hundred yards away. Neighbors that far off were not likely to know much.

He strolled around to the back yard, hopping over a four-foot fence designed to keep wandering children from the swimming pool. There was a paperbound book face down on a poolside table and Leopold noticed with interest that its cover was curled with dampness. It hadn't rained in six days, though he supposed splashing from the pool might have dampened it.

That was when he glanced

into the gently moving waters and saw the body at the bottom of the deepest part, just beneath the diving board. It was a man, fully dressed and wearing a sport jacket. The body was bloated from many days in the water and held to the bottom by a large anchor tied around it.

Leopold looked away, feeling sick. He suspected he'd found Ralph Quiston.

The Quiston home was beyond Leopold's jurisdiction, and the investigation was under the command of Lieutenant Donofrio of the State Police—a tall, weatherbeaten man who seemed very cooperative. "That's Quiston all right," he told Leopold later in the day. "We've got positive identification on him." He was carrying the clothes they'd removed from the corpse.

Leopold nodded, running his fingers over the waterlogged clothing. The shirt had been punctured by bullet holes in front and back. "How long do you figure he was in the pool?"

"Hard to say. Somewhere around a week. Shot twice with a small-caliber weapon. The killer must have been close. The bullets passed through the body."

Leopold held up the sport coat. There were no holes in it, but he thought he could make

out traces of blood, though since it had been a week in the water it might have been his imagination.

"Here's a picture of Quiston," Donofrio said, holding out a framed portrait of a muscular broad-shouldered man. "Know him?"

Leopold shook his head. "Never saw him before. But this may tie in with an attempted murder I'm investigating. If you're agreeable, I'd like to call one of my men and search the house."

"What do you expect to find, Captain?"

"Dirty movies," Leopold answered with a smile.

Two hours later, Lieutenant Fletcher met him at the Quiston home. "Big place. It'll take days to search it all."

"I'm after the films, Fletcher. If they're around, chances are there's a projector and screen with them. It shouldn't be too hard."

"You think he keeps them here?"

Leopold was standing in the center of a large high-ceilinged living room. He gestured at the walls with their bizarre paintings and almost Medieval trappings. "Look at this place and tell me what you think. I read something in a book by Chesterton once about a tower

whose very shape was wicked. This house is like that. I can imagine it as some sort of vice den."

"With orgies," Fletcher added, grinning.

"Laugh if you want to but that body in the swimming pool is no joke."

"How was he killed?"

"Shot twice with a small-caliber pistol. The anchor was apparently a pool ornament and the killer simply tied it around the body and pushed the whole thing into the water."

"But why use the anchor?"

"A body floating on top of the water is more likely to be found than one at the bottom. This way he went for maybe a week before being found." Leopold was going through the bookshelves as he talked, opening each volume to check for hidden cavities.

"You think Esters and McGuire did it?"

"I don't know, Fletcher. It's a possibility, of course."

Fletcher was examining the sliding doors of a walk-in closet and he gave a sudden shout of triumph. "I think I've found it, Captain. There's a little room here with a movie projector..."

Leopold hurried to join him. The place was indeed a projection room and they quickly found the hidden wall holes for

projecting films into the wide blank wall space between two modernistic paintings. A metal rack held perhaps a hundred film cans, all labeled with the names of racetracks and dates spanning the past few years.

"They're horserace films," Fletcher confirmed, unreeling several feet of film from one can.

Leopold nodded. "You said that was his business, supplying them to private clubs."

"Why would any guy want a hundred of them to project on his living room wall?"

"Perhaps we'd better take a look," Leopold said. "Put one on the machine."

Fletcher threaded the film into the projector and turned it on. They went back into the living room to watch a color film of the fifth race at Aqueduct, on last season's opening day. There were a few shots of the crowd, but most of the footage was given over to the race itself, a fairly close affair that settled down to a duel between two horses, with a long-necked black steed finally winning by a head.

"I'd have lost," Fletcher grumbled. "I picked the other one."

Another race began almost immediately, with the horses lining up at the starting gate. Fletcher looked them over and

decided, "I like Number 3."

Suddenly the horses were gone, replaced on the wall by the grainy figures of a man and woman just entering a hotel room. "I'll be damned," Leopold said softly.

"A sex film spliced into the horserace! Whoever heard of such a thing?"

"Ralph Quiston, obviously. It's the secret of his whole operation."

"And this is why they killed him and tried to kill Sammy Clark? To take over the racket?"

Leopold watched the figures on the wall going through their programmed ritual. "That's just the trouble, Fletcher—it isn't a racket any more. The recent court decisions have made this sort of thing acceptable. I suppose Quiston still used the horserace gimmick in the event the law got tough and started cracking down again, but still the whole thing hardly seems likely to lead to murder. The so-called racket you speak of is only another business today, and Quiston's operation could be run into the ground by skilled competition, the same as any other."

"But if that's true why were Esters and McGuire so upset by Sammy Clark's theft of one film? Why couldn't they just go out and make another?"

Leopold chewed on his lower lip. "That's the problem, Fletcher. Esters is dead and McGuire's not talking—probably because he knows about Quiston's murder and doesn't want to be involved."

"We'd better look through these other films for the one with Sammy Clark and the girl."

"Good idea," Leopold agreed. "You start on that while I look around some more."

It took him the better part of two hours to search the house, looking through closets full of expensive clothing and file drawers of careful records. When he returned to the living room, Fletcher was still running the films. "Nothing yet, Captain. I'm getting bored."

"Keep at it," Leopold picked up the telephone and flipped through the book of frequently called numbers that rested beneath it. One caught his eye immediately. "Hasken Seems—isn't he the son of the banking family?"

Fletcher grunted from the projection room. "With all his money, he sure didn't need Quiston for anything."

"I wonder if he ties in with this business."

"There's one way to find out, Captain. Let's go ask him."

Leopold was immediately

aware of Lieutenant Fletcher's dislike for Hasken Seems, a handsome young investment banker whose father was president of the largest savings and loan company in town. Seems was slim and narrow-shouldered, with the forced smile and elaborate gestures that labeled him a phony in Fletcher's eyes.

"I'm sorry I can't spare more time for you gentlemen," he told them, seating himself behind a desk strewn with notices of stock offerings and annual meetings. "Is your business important?"

"You might say it's important to Ralph Quiston," Fletcher told him. "He's been murdered."

"Quiston? Quiston? That name seems familiar."

"He was in the sports-film business," Leopold explained. "The news of his death is in the afternoon papers."

"But surely I can't . . ."

"Your name was in his book of phone numbers. Your name and your private phone number."

"I have contacts with a great many businessmen."

Fletcher snorted. "Ralph Quiston's business was financing pornographic movies and splicing them into his sporting films."

Hasken Seems bristled. "I

know nothing about that."

"Can you think of any reason why he would have your private number?" Leopold asked.

"None whatsoever!"

"How about a man named Sammy Clark?"

"Never heard of him."

"Frank Esters? Yance McGuire?"

"The names mean nothing to me."

"Then you don't read the papers very closely," Fletcher told him. "They've been on the front page for the last two days."

Hasken Seems frowned. "That boxer who was kidnapped by the two thugs? How would I know anything about that?"

"All three of them worked for Ralph Quiston in one way or another," Leopold said.

"I told you—I don't even remember the man! And I certainly don't know his employees. You'll have to excuse me now, gentlemen. I have an important business engagement."

He stood up, snapped his briefcase shut, and led them toward the outer office. Leopold was prepared to write off the interview as a failure, and that would have been the end of it, if there hadn't been someone waiting for Seems in his outer office, relaxing in a chair

as if she was very much at home. horserace picture, just as you said."

It was the girl from the candy store, Judy Spanger.

Hasken Seems dropped into his chair once more, all thought of dinner forgotten. "All right," he told them reluctantly, "I suppose there's no point in hiding it any longer."

"No," Leopold agreed. "It's good to see you again, Miss Spanger. I assume you and Mr. Seems are close friends."

"Yes," she answered in a barely audible voice.

He wheeled back to Seems. "Now do you want to tell me who's been blackmailing you?"

"I..."

"When Judy Spanger made that film, she was just another girl. But when she became friendly with you, it turned into a whole different matter, didn't it?"

Seems drew himself up. "Judy and I plan to be married. The film is part of her past. It makes no difference to me."

"But it might make a difference to your family."

"Nobody's blackmailing me," Seems insisted. "And the film is destroyed. I saw to that."

"Did you?"

"I burned it myself. The film and the negative both. It was spliced into the middle of a

"Which means you hired Sammy Clark to steal it from McGuire."

Hasken Seems looked unhappy. "I hired him to buy it back for a thousand dollars. I could hardly go to McGuire myself with the offer, could I? When McGuire wouldn't agree, Clark knocked him out and took the film. He brought it to me, negative and all, and I burned it up. Then McGuire got Esters and they kidnaped Clark from his gym. They wouldn't believe the film was destroyed and they wanted it back to blackmail me. They figured if I'd offered a thousand, it was probably worth twenty times that much to me."

"Did they also kill Ralph Quiston to cut him out of the deal?"

"Perhaps. All I know is that I didn't kill him."

"That remains to be seen."

"Do I look like a murderer to you, Captain?"

"I've seen all kinds," Leopold said. "In any event I'll want to question you again after I've talked with Sammy Clark."

"Sammy doesn't know any more than what I've told you."

"Why did you choose him to get the film back for you?"

"Because he was in it! He

already knew the whole story of Judy's involvement. Judy suggested him and I jumped at the chance. It avoided bringing in another person who'd have to be told the story."

"All right," Leopold sighed. "I'll be in touch with you."

On the way downstairs, Fletcher asked, "You believe that guy after the way he lied to us at the beginning?"

"Right now, Fletcher, I don't know who to believe in this case. Did you have any luck going through those films at Quiston's home?"

Fletcher shook his head. "The one with Clark and Judy just isn't there."

"Any ideas?"

They left the building and walked across the street to the car. Fletcher was silent for a time. Finally he said, "Maybe McGuire killed Quiston to get his print of the film after McGuire's own copy was stolen."

Leopold shook his head. "If McGuire killed Quiston and got the film, there'd have been no need to kidnap Sammy Clark." He thought a moment and then added, "But that gives me an idea. Drop me at the next corner, will you, Fletcher?"

The gym was crowded in the late afternoon as a loose circle of spectators watched the two

fighters sparring in the center ring. The place smelled of sweat and rubbing alcohol, but the others probably had been there too long to notice. Leopold asked one of the trainers where he could find Sammy Clark, and was directed to the dressing rooms.

The boxer was in the third room he tried, pulling on a T-shirt over his muscular chest. "Captain Leopold! I could have used a lifesaver about an hour ago. I was sparring with a guy and he knocked me silly."

"Sorry to hear that, Sammy."

"What brings you slumming down here?"

"I've been talking with Has-ken Seems."

"Oh?"

"He hired you to get back that film."

"Yeah, I guess he did."

"And you delivered it to him."

"Sure! I told you I wanted to see the girl get a break. That was the only time she ever let anybody take pictures of her like that. Seems wants to marry her, but because of his family he had to get the film back first. He asked me to buy it back and when McGuire wouldn't sell I just took it."

Leopold nodded slowly. "And you told me you took the negative and one print—right?"

"Yes."

"Just the scenes with you and Judy and Esters. Nothing else?"

"That's right."

"But the film you delivered to Seems had the horserace sequence at the beginning. That was the film he inspected and then burned. And that film could only have come from Ralph Quiston's own collection."

"Say, what is this?"

"It's murder, Sammy. You killed Quiston to get that film. You gave it to Seems to burn so you could keep the one you stole from McGuire. I think you decided on a little blackmail yourself."

"Hell, Captain—you're the guy who saved my life, remember? What are you trying to do to me now?"

"Just get at the truth, Sammy. You took that film from Ralph Quiston's home."

"So I took it! That doesn't prove I killed him!"

"No, Sammy, but your sport coat does."

"What's that supposed to mean?" He'd finished dressing and he stood facing Leopold. "What, huh?"

"When they fished Quiston out of his swimming pool, he was wearing a sport coat. It's unlikely that he'd be wearing one while lounging by the pool

with a book, and it's downright impossible he could have been wearing that one. There were traces of bloodstains on it even after those days in the water, but not exit holes for the bullets. They came out the back of Quiston's shirt, but never touched the jacket he was supposed to be wearing. Which means, simply, that he wasn't wearing the jacket when he was shot. It was put on him afterwards.

"Why? To dispose of it, of course. I imagine the killer got blood on it when he was tying that anchor to Quiston's body. He couldn't risk leaving the house with a bloodstained jacket, but he couldn't just abandon the jacket there, either. So he removed any identification and simply put it on the dead man. If it hadn't been for the lack of bullet holes, I'd have assumed it belonged to Quiston and thought no more of it."

"You're saying that jacket was mine?"

"I'm saying that, Sammy, yes. You couldn't have known the body would remain underwater for a week and be bloated when it was finally found. And the jacket trick would only have worked if Quiston and the killer were the same size. I saw a picture of Quiston—he was muscular like you, with broad shoulders. Now since the film

was missing I had to assume the killer had taken it. Therefore the killer was one of the people who knew about the film—you, Judy Spanger, Esters, McGuire, or Seems.

"But would Esters and McGuire have left the body to be found in the pool when they had the whole of Long Island Sound only a few feet away? No, because you told me yourself they planned to dump your body in the Sound after dark. Certainly they would have done the same with Quiston. That leaves you and Judy and Seems. The coat couldn't belong to Judy, nor to thin narrow-shouldered Hasken Seems. It could only have belonged to you, Sammy, and your guilt is confirmed by your theft of the film from Quiston's house."

Sammy Clark's eyes narrowed. "What are you going to do?"

Leopold slipped the gun from his spring holster. "I have to take you in, Sammy."

The boxer threw back his head and laughed. "This is where we came in! Only last time you were saving my life."

"Full circle, Sammy. Back where we started."

"You won't kill me, Captain. Put the gun away."

"Esters nearly killed you when I broke down that door. I suppose they knew you'd murdered Quiston and ruined their racket or they wouldn't have been so anxious to finish you."

Clark took a step toward the door. "All right. At least give me a half hour, Captain. Enough for a head start."

"I can't, Sammy."

He laughed again, sure of himself. "Hell, you saved my life. You can't kill me now!"

"Sammy . . ."

"A half hour, Captain."

"Sammy, if you walk out that door, I'll shoot."

The boxer turned and walked from the room. Leopold took a deep breath and shot him in the left leg.



NEVER PUBLISHED BEFORE

Lawrence Treat

The Eldridge Rivalry

Arthur Enderby was a man whose beginnings could not have been humbler. George Morrow Eldridge III was to the manor (and manner) born. Early in his life, Arthur placed himself in secret competition with George. But you can't compete with a million dollars in a haphazard way; you've got to have a plan...

Arthur Enderby was not born to wealth. Rather, as the offspring of welfare recipients, he was reared in a poverty that foresaw a dingy forlorn future, jobless and hopeless, with a welfare check of his own as the chief goal in life. But in school, by alphabetical chance placed next to one George Morrow Eldridge III, he learned that there were people on whom wealth descended automatically merely because an ancestor ceased to exist and, ceasing, had the foresight to leave a will.

The concept was shattering. As Enderby grew up he nursed the idea, cozened it and developed it, and eventually concluded that the privilege of inheriting riches was open to the

smart as well as to the lucky. All you needed was somebody with assets who wrote a will in your favor. The theory was simple enough, and at the age of twenty-one Enderby resolved to put it into practise. With Althea.

He wooed her in a pleasant enough but rather nasal voice that droned on inexhaustibly, with hypnotic effect. His energy never flagged, his will never let up, his purpose was always sure. What he made up his mind to do, he did.

When he married Althea, he had no firm idea how much money she had nor how he intended to get rid of her. It didn't take him long to find out that her modest income was derived from a trust fund that

terminated on her death. He felt tricked. He was at least five tax brackets away from Eldridge, whose father had recently had the kindness to die.

Enderby, however, was not downhearted. He went to night school and studied accounting so that, in future, he would have the expertise with which to evaluate whatever estate he decided to inherit. Furthermore, he took a course in statistics and wrote a paper outlining a formula for determining a man's wealth from the make of car he drove, the probable cost of his house, where he vacationed, and where his wife bought her clothes. On the basis of his system, he estimated that Eldridge's paternal inheritance amounted to between five and six hundred thousand dollars.

Although the task of catching up with Eldridge seemed monumental, Enderby felt that he had made a promising start. He regarded Althea as merely a practice run, and he knew that time was on his side. She was a reasonably attractive wife who loved to cook, which meant that the amenities of bed and board were well attended to. He had ample leisure in which to formulate his plans, and he was under no temptation to panic and give way to a sudden impulse, such as drowning Althea or pushing her

off a cliff or administering an ordinary, detectable poison.

He took stock of himself. He was energetic, healthy, and well built, with an attractive personality and strong masculine features. He had a good mind with a creative bent, and after a due period of concentration he conceived of what he regarded as a brilliant and foolproof method. Botulism!

When the newspapers reported a case of death by botulism, the very word inspired him, and he hounded the local library in search of all the information available on the subject. He learned that botulism was an acute poisoning that attacked the nerves and paralyzed the respiratory system, thus causing death by asphyxiation. The bacillus that produced the poison was a primitive organism that lived without air and was exceedingly difficult to kill, although the toxins it produced were easily destroyed by moderate heat. Botulism was most prevalent in food that had been improperly canned in the home, and Althea, bless her, was a dedicated home canner.

Knowledge, however, was merely the beginning, for the trick was to acquire a can with the desired contamination. Lesser minds might have given up, but Enderby felt challenged by the difficulty of the problem.

He solved it by signing up as an agent for a new patented pressure cooker. He canvassed the local housewives and discussed at length the vicissitudes of home canning. His heart rose hopefully whenever he heard of a failure, and he tracked down each rejected container in the hope of pouncing on the coveted botulin bacillus. When he finally found a can he was sure was contaminated he brought it home and secretly stirred part of its contents into a jar of Althea's preserved green beans. He marked the jar for identification in code that had significance only for him and then waited anxiously for the night she'd serve it.

As the great moment approached and Althea was about to serve the tainted beans for dinner, he managed to trip over a rug and sprain his ankle. He went to bed in great pain and, although Althea brought his dinner to him in bed, he was unable to swallow any food. He urged her, however, not to worry about him, and eventually she ate her lethal meal in solitary enjoyment.

The results were all that he could desire. She lasted two days and expired humbly, while her faithful husband sat at her bedside and propped his swollen ankle on the red plastic cushion of a hospital chair. Limping

painfully, he attended her funeral and wept inconsolably for the benefit of all who observed him.

Recalling the incident, Enderby wondered at his naivete and marveled at the risks he'd taken and the breaks he'd had. First of all, he had questioned a dozen or more women about home canning and the perils thereof, and the police could easily have become suspicious and begun an investigation. Next, he'd gambled on his spoiled jar actually containing the botulin bacillus, when it might easily have had some other infection and been devoid of the lethal toxin. And finally he'd had no guarantee that the disease would be fatal. Although he'd known that the incidence of death was about seventy percent, it was only at the funeral that it occurred to him that he'd chanced being saddled with an invalid wife for the remainder of his days.

He'd been extraordinarily lucky, and Althea had been good to him in her limited way. Simple, credulous, stupid. Althea—she'd left him all she could, which was three thousand dollars and a house that he promptly sold. After taxes, he ended up with a mere eleven thousand dollars, which was a far cry from the Eldridge inheritance. Still, it was enough for

Enderby to go to the expensive Carribean resort hotel where he met Marian.

She fell for him on touch. They danced, they had drinks, and he took her for a walk on the moonlit beach, where she poured out her heart to him. She was recently widowed and her marriage had been disappointing. All her husband had ever thought about was money. What kind of a man was that?

Enderby refrained from comment, but alone in his room that night he formulated certain questions that needed answering. In Marian's company all next day, he led up to his questions indirectly and in the course of casual conversation, but he managed to find out what wines she drank, the name of her stockbroker, and where she bought her clothes. Applying the principles of the Enderby formula, he figured that she was worth a half million dollars, which would shortly put him on a par with Eldridge.

From that moment on, Enderby was her constant companion, and he was delighted to learn that her hobby was antique jewelry.

"I put all my spare money in it," she said. "It's not only pretty, but its value goes up every year. The older it is, the more it's worth."

Enderby was deeply moved

by the thought of the capital she was accumulating for him. "I'd like to see some of that jewelry of yours," he said. "You must look lovely in it."

"I wouldn't wear it for anything in the world," she said. "I'm afraid I'd be robbed, but I go and look at it in the vault at least once a month."

"You could insure it," he said.

"Would that prevent me from getting mugged?" she asked.

Enderby admired her prudence, and told himself that a gem in the vault was worth two on the neck. "You're very wise," he remarked serenely.

They were married three months later. By then, his eleven thousand was down to the last few hundred, for he wooed her in style. On their round-the-world honeymoon he confessed that he was broke, but her reaction was to be flattered that he'd spent the last of his money on her. She wanted him and she was willing to pay the price. Or rather her price. His was never mentioned.

Their wedding trip took them to Tokyo. There his good luck held and Marian was sick for a few days, which gave him the freedom to hang around bars and brothels in the hope of making certain contacts. For a modest sum, a disreputable Am-

erican expatriate put him in touch with a group of experienced brigands.

After he'd settled details with them, Enderby told Marian that he had a lead to some fabulous antique jewelry, which he'd arranged for her to see. He gave her a slip of paper with Japanese writing on it and said it was the address to which she must go. She had no idea what the writing was, and she had no suspicions. Most Americans can't read Japanese script, the hotel porters are always handing them slips of paper with addresses to be shown to taxi drivers. The only difference on that particular evening was that the car Marian stepped into was not a taxi, and that neither Enderby nor Marian ever found out what was written on the slip. She gave it to the driver, climbed into a car, and left. Permanently. With the two thousand dollars in cash with which she had planned to buy the jewelry.

Enderby congratulated himself on the cleverness of his payoff, which Marian carried on her own person. He did not, however, brag. Rather, on seeing her leave the hotel, he repaired to the bar and sat there until closing time. Then he professed amazement that it was so late and expressed his worry. A hotel clerk called the police,

after which Enderby went to bed and slept serenely, at peace with the world.

In the morning the police called him to say that his wife's body had been found in a remote section of the city. Her empty pocketbook was lying next to her, mute evidence of what had happened.

Enderby went to headquarters and for the most part told the truth to an English-speaking detective. His manner was forthright. He said he'd met a man in a bar who professed to know where Marian could buy some antique jewelry cheap, and that the man had given him a scrap of paper written in Japanese characters, which purported to be the address to which she was to go. Enderby's only important lie came at this point, where he claimed that the man was Japanese.

"I'm afraid I couldn't identify him," he said. "So many Japanese look alike to me. I wish I could describe him, but I can't."

The detective nodded understandingly, and Enderby continued. "I feel responsible for her death," he said with complete candor. "I shouldn't have let her go alone, but—" He didn't finish the sentence, because his philosophy was never to tell a lie unless he had to.

The detective, with charac-

teristic Japanese graciousness, then offered to arrange for the shipment of the body back to the states. Enderby demurred.

"She loved Japan," he said. Which was true. "I think she would have liked to have been buried here." Which was false. But Enderby saw no sense in paying for the shipment of a coffin.

He left Japan the next day, with no expectation of returning.

As the chief beneficiary of Marian's will, Enderby was now wealthy. He had not only caught up with Eldridge, he had done so by his own efforts. Although his property was inherited, he could justifiably pride himself on being a self-made man.

His satisfaction, however, was short-lived. Before the year was out, he read that Eldridge's maternal grandfather had died and left Eldridge a substantial fortune. Discreet investigation, plus the application of the Enderby formula, led to an estimate of Eldridge's worth as well over a million. It meant that Enderby was several hundred thousand dollars short of his new quota; his life-work was reduced to a shambles.

Nevertheless, he was not dismayed. He had a solid financial stake and the mature experience of a man who had success-

fully liquidated two wives. He felt that he had finally mastered the art of uxoricide, and he was resolved not to settle for less than an additional million. Since Eldridge had no more ancestors, he would then be left hopelessly behind.

In his usual thorough way, Enderby proceeded to analyze his career. The first time he'd been lucky. The second time, while his plan had been praiseworthy and the risks minimal, there had been risk in the persons of hired confederates. His third foray, he promised himself, would be a model of perfection. No one else would be involved, and no evidence could lead to him. Although this was a high ideal to attain, he felt he was equal to it.

He met Sybil in a taxi. It was a rainy day and they both hailed the same cab and reached it at the same time. With his feral instinct for spotting a victim and setting the proper snare, he offered to withdraw.

"Madam," he said with a bow, "it will be a pleasure for me to get wet if you can thereby go home in comfort."

"Maybe we can share the cab," she said, performing as he'd expected her to. "Where are you going?"

"With you," he said. And the combination of his words and his manner was irresistible.

She was twelve years older than he, and twice as wealthy. He researched her painstakingly and made certain that she had the desired million, with no strings attached. Once he was satisfied that her candidacy was acceptable, he set about his courtship. After a week of flattery they were married quietly in Maryland. He was twenty-nine; she gave her age as over twenty-one.

He fawned and flattered her for a month and then embarked on a deliberate campaign to alienate her. He played on her sensibilities with masterly effect. He made her feel old and unwanted and depressed. He never directly suggested drugs, but he gave her a gentle nudge into the path of temptation. He saw to it that she found the company of addicts, and he tipped off a couple of pushers to the effect that Mrs. Arthur Enderby was an easy mark. And she was. Vain, suspicious, selfish and paranoid, drugs took her out of her misery. Within a few months of their marriage she was mainlining. She was hooked.

Enderby waited over a year before administering the *coup de grace*. He analyzed the heroin she was taking and found, as he had expected to find, that it was heavily diluted. He then bought a packet of straight her-

oin and had it analyzed to make sure of its purity. Even so, he waited a full six months before substituting it for her customary supply. She merely injected herself one evening and died of an overdose. There was no possibility of charging Enderby with a crime. He was home free. Let Eldridge outinherit him now!

With the sum of a million invested in conservative stocks and tax-free bonds, Enderby went traveling. He had earned the good life through his own unaided efforts, and he proceeded to enjoy it. But it was in his home town, where he'd started out with Althea, that he met Wendy.

She had no social position. She was the daughter of an electrician and she often went out on jobs as his assistant. She was, however, engaged to be married to her high school sweetheart, a man named Max. Wendy was young and beautiful and would be an ornament in his house. He wanted her, and he swept her off her feet. After all, how could she resist a handsome, personable millionaire who promised her all the glamor of London and Paris and Copenhagen? They lived in Europe for six months before returning to the states.

The house he built for her in a swank California community

was sumptuous and it amused him to see how she took charge of the electrical work, superintending the wiring and installing a dozen unusual gadgets. He had a smart wife as well as a beautiful one, and he counted on raising a family with Wendy and living happily ever after.

He thought occasionally of her ex-sweetheart who lived two thousand miles away and decided he would never bring her any nearer, for he disliked taking risks. He had so much to live for, and he installed a number of safety devices in his house. He'd read somewhere that there were more accidents in the home than on the highway, and that most of them occurred in the bathroom.

The possibility of slipping in the bathroom haunted him, and he had non-skid flooring put down. The bath itself, sunken at floor level, had been treated with a special abrasive. Lest he burn himself in over-hot water, he had a thermostatic control which he dialed to the precise temperature he wanted. And there in the tub, evening after evening, he would lie in sybaritic luxury and reflect upon his blessings.

There were many, as has been set forth, and on one particular evening he reviewed them with pride. Presently the heat of the water, the image of

Wendy waiting for him in the next room, and the thought of his solid investments all conspired to induce in him a sense of euphoria. He dwelt long upon the pleasures of being Arthur Enderby, Esquire.

He yawned contentedly. Inasmuch as Wendy had no money of her own, he had no further use for his talents. Still, if she ever transgressed, if the unthinkable ever happened and he tired of her, he might let her follow in the path of the others, just to keep his hand in.

The idea stimulated him and counteracted the lethargy induced by the heat of his bath. He'd had enough of lazing, and he stood up and turned on the well-insulated switch that activated an infra-red heat lamp in the ceiling. It was one of Wendy's installations, designed especially for his comfort, and this was the first time he'd used it. Then, still standing in the water, he reached out for his towel. To steady himself, he grabbed hold of the rack.

The shock was immediate, and it riveted his hands to the metal bar. His brain went dead at the first jolt.

Wendy knew enough about electricity not to touch him. She called the police, who in turn summoned the emergency squad. She was hysterical when they arrived, and the doctor

gave her a sedative and ordered her to bed.

She had little enough to tell. Her husband had been taking a bath, as he often did before retiring. When he stayed in the bathroom so long, she investigated and found him dead, leaning against the towel rack and clutching it tightly.

Investigation revealed the cause of this unusual accident. The screws of the towel rack were long enough to reach the hot wire leading to the infra-red fixture. Once it was turned on, the rack became part of the circuit. Enderby, standing in a tub of water, constituted a per-

fect grounding. As his wet hands made contact with the rack, he'd been electrocuted.

His widow sold the house as soon as she could. She said it was showy and in bad taste, and she returned to the small town where she'd been brought up. She did not, however, marry her high school sweetheart. After her European life, she found him provincial and limited in his point of view. Instead, she turned to someone who was steeped in culture and to the manner born: a man named Eldridge, already wealthy, but to whom she brought a fortune of her own.



NEVER PUBLISHED BEFORE

Stephen Marlowe

Chester Drum Takes Over

Somewhere along the line they had been sold a bill of goods on Vinnie Hatcher, so it didn't surprise Chester Drum when his phone rang in the middle of the night. Vinnie Hatcher was trouble...

Detective: CHESTER DRUM

“Signor Drum? Signor Chester Drum?”

I looked at my watch. One in the morning and a small bit. I had drifted off in bed with a book face down on my chest. A stiff wind was lashing cold March rain against the windowpanes.

“Or a sleepy facsimile thereof,” I said into the phone.

“Prego, signore?”

“Yeah, this is Drum.”

“One moment, please,” she said in English. “For Domodossola, Italy.”

I lit a cigarette and jacked myself partially upright. The book slid off my chest and thumped on the floor. Well, I thought, at least they'd come back as far as Domodossola. It was better than I had expected,

with Vinnie Hatcher running things. Domodossola was the first town of any size on the Italian side of the border, down over the Simplon Pass. It was four hours from the bedroom of my apartment if you drove like hell. I thought there was a pretty good chance I would be driving like hell.

“Mr. Drum?” Another girl's voice, not the operator. The connection was sharp. She could have been calling from a phone right here in Geneva.

I admitted my identity again.

“This is Miss Sabra. We're in Domodossola, on the way back.”

“I know where you are,” I said. “What's up?”

“Trouble. The worst kind of

trouble." Her voice was twangling like a taut bowstring. She was all keyed up for a scream.

"You mean the deal's off?"

"No. We left Rome this morning and got this far. The Grand Hotel in Domodossola. We had an auto accident. Mr. Shalom couldn't go on. You knew about his heart."

I smiled a little at the corny noms de guerre. Miss Native-of-Israel and Mr. Peace.

"And of course you can't risk a doctor, is that it?"

"A doctor wouldn't help," Miss Sabra said flatly. "He's dead. He died a half hour ago. What are we going to do?"

I thought for a minute, wondering why Vinnie Hatcher couldn't tell her what to do. He was right there. "Do corpses give you the willies?" I asked.

"I am a lieutenant in the Israeli Army," Miss Sabra said. "I'm not squeamish."

"Okay. Get him in the car. You sit in back with him, like he's sleeping, and Hatcher drives you back over the Simplon into Switzerland. What's the problem? They don't make a big thing about the frontier between Italy and Switzerland. You'll be in Geneva before breakfast."

"Mr. Hatcher smashed the car. That's why we stopped here. You'd better speak to him."

"The next voice you hear..." a man's voice said after a slight pause. "Hi, Chet old buddy."

He sounded pretty drunk. "Hello, Vinnie," I said. "Can you rent a car?"

"In the middle of the night in Domowhat's-its-name? We need you, old buddy. With chariot."

"How'd it happen?"

"A guy passed me coming into town and I kind of wandered into a ditch. Busted the front axle."

"I should be there in four hours," I said. "Lay off the sauce, will you?"

"Who pays for the damages?" Vinnie whined. "I don't have that kind of insurance."

"We'll discuss it with Miss Sabra later. Just lay off the sauce."

"I am cold stone disgustingly sober," Vinnie said.

He wasn't, but I told him: "Stay that way. Tell Miss Sabra four hours. I'll see you."

I hung up and dressed in a hurry. I needed a shave, but no one was going to stop me at the border, either coming or going, for that. I loaded five cartridges into the Smith & Wesson Magnum .44 and shoved it into my raincoat pocket. The car that forced Vinnie into the ditch could have been driven by an

Arab

Two packs of cigarettes, and no time for coffee. Forty minutes on the autoroute to Lausanne and then three hours and some to reach and cross the Simplon Pass into Italy. I went downstairs and ran a couple of blocks through the rain to where I'd parked my VW in front of the big Gothic church. I always park there, and they never ticket the heap. Maybe they figure I'm clergy, which is a laugh in my line of work. I'm a private detective, same as Vinnie Hatcher. Only most of the time I don't drink on the job.

Hatcher came to the door of one of the rooms they'd taken in the hotel in Domodossola with a half-empty bottle of Strega in his hand.

"Four hours right on the nose," he said.

"I told you to lay off the sauce. Where are they?"

"Room 207. Right down the hall. It raining or snowing on the pass?"

"Raining, but that could change."

Hatcher raised the bottle toward his face. I slapped it out of his hand, caught it in mid-air, and took it past him into the bathroom and poured it out in the sink. He got a big hand on my shoulder while I was doing that, and I turned and slapped it away as I had slapped the

bottle out of his hand.

We looked at each other, a full half minute of it. Then Hatcher shrugged and smiled. "Okay, boss," he said, mockingly. "Anything you say, boss." "Be ready to roll in ten minutes."

"I'm ready right now."

Vinnie Hatcher was a big man, palely blond and freckled, with washed-out blue eyes and a face dames would find attractive, complete with broken nose and a mean prow of a jaw. He was maybe 35 or 40. He had been a captain in Uncle's Army, running the counterintelligence show at a base in Germany until they'd given him the boot for such as falling down dead drunk on the floor of the officers' open mess about five times too often. He'd drifted into private work in Switzerland, as more than one American had, including me, because American corporations with European headquarters in Geneva, Zug, and Lausanne pay pretty good rates for private snooping. Word was on the Rue de Rhone that his drinking problem was getting worse. He'd probably needed Miss Sabra's assignment for eating money. Or drinking money.

Miss Sabra did not open the door to my knock. "Who is it?" she said.

"Drum."

That wasn't enough for her to be sure of the voice. "Say something else."

"I just poured half a bottle of Strega down the sink in Hatcher's room."

She opened the door. Black raincoat, unbuttoned, and the butt of a cigarette clenched nervously between thumb and forefinger. A high-cheekboned face and the dark eyes enormous but looking tired and defeated now. Short black hair, cut so she'd have no trouble with it under an Israeli Army helmet, if dames in the Israeli Army wear helmets. She was 25, give or take a year or two, pretty, and stacked in an intriguing lean and hungry way. I didn't know her real name.

She shut the door behind me. We were in a small sitting room dominated by one of those wild Venetian glass chandeliers in about fourteen colors.

"Where is he?"

"On the bed."

I went inside and pulled the sheet back. He was a small bald man in his sixties, wearing gaudy pajamas. Face gray now, grayer than a face ever gets unless it belongs to a dead man. I raised one arm by the wrist. Miss Sabra started to say something, then changed her mind. I let the arm drop. Stiff, and it would get stiffer. Rigor mortis was just setting in.

"Where are his clothes?"

She pointed to the armoire. I went over and got his trousers and wrestled him into them. Shoes on the bare feet and an ancient, not-quite-threadbare trenchcoat finished the job. I threw the rest of his stuff into his canvas suitcase.

"What kind of passports are you carrying?"

"American," she said, looking at me defiantly.

"They any good?"

"They got us across the border once."

"Stamped?"

"No."

They rarely stamp passports at border crossings in Western Europe these days. All they want is a quick look at the date.

"Deal all set?" I asked.

"Yes and no."

"You'll burn your hand," I told her.

She looked down at the butt of the cigarette and crushed it out in an ashtray. Her fingers were stained yellow from the tar. She lit another cigarette.

"He was nervous," she told me. "It's against the law, where he gets the parts, to sell arms to Israel. Of course the fact that everyone is selling arms to the Arabs so they can have another try at—"

"Skip the politics," I said.

"You don't like us, do you?"

"Miss Sabra," I said, "none of my best friends are Arabs."

"Why are you angry with me then?"

"Because you hired me and I set the deal up for you and then you fired me and got Hatcher."

"It was a mistake. I admit that."

"Okay, forget it. I'll get you back across the border. How'd it go with Mr. Milo?"

Milo was an expatriate Greek dealer in jet-plane parts. He had a police permit to stay in Italy. At the moment he could go nowhere else, which meant that he'd had to see Miss Sabra and Mr. Shalom in Italy, if they arranged a deal for the sale of military hardware the Israelis needed to keep their Air Force flying. Prove that Miss Sabra and Mr. Shalom had been in Italy, and Milo might find himself cut off at the source of supply, which would put him out of business. He sold for cash on the barrelhead and he didn't care who he sold to as long as his profits ran in the neighborhood of 200 percent. But the possibly senile, possibly paranoid president of the country of origin was mad at Israel. If it could be proved that Milo sold to Miss Sabra and Mr. Shalom he'd have to look around for another commodity, such as guano or eiderdown feathers.

"Mr. Milo was worried because he was our obvious contact," Miss Sabra said.

"You paid in advance?"

"We had to."

"Check?"

"Cash. A great deal of money. The hardware will be shipped from Naples to Haifa in a Greek freighter later this week, disguised as agricultural equipment."

"With the customs people paid to look the other way."

"Of course. But if it is learned that Mr. Shalom and I were in Italy, the deal is off. That's what Milo said."

"We'll cross over in a few hours. What are you worried about?"

"We have to cross the frontier with a dead man."

Miss Sabra's face crumpled suddenly, and she was crying. She looked very young and defenseless. I felt awkward.

"I'll get you across," I said. "He'll be in his own bed in Geneva in the morning. You'll have a death certificate saying he died in Switzerland. Take it easy."

"You don't understand."

"Pull yourself together," I said harshly. I wanted to get going.

She went on crying. Her voice keened against the damp lapel of my raincoat. "My parents died during the first war

with the Arabs, when I was a baby. He—he was like my own father."

I patted her shoulder stiffly, not knowing what else to do. I wished we were in the car and driving up the Simplon Pass.

There was a knock at the door. "What're you guys waiting for?" Vinnie Hatcher called.

The first part of it was easy because the Grand Hotel in Domodóssola was grand in name only and because it was still this side of six in the morning.

I went down the service stairs and found the back way out through the kitchen. It was dark and smelled of garlic and olive oil. I ducked outside and around the block through the heavy rain to drive the VW behind the hotel, then took a peek into the lobby before returning to Hatcher and Miss Sabra. An old night porter in a black uniform with the crossed keys of his calling on the left lapel was snoozing in his lodge. The reception desk was deserted. Satisfied, I returned to the service stairs and climbed them.

The door was open and Hatcher's head appeared in it.

"Miss Sabra pays your bill," I said. "You and me take him down the back way and put him in the car. Then you go back for the bags."

Hatcher looked at me. "Just like that?"

"There's nobody here but us chickens."

Miss Sabra went away before we tackled the body. Even in the few minutes that had passed, it had grown stiffer. We propped it between us like a drunk, an arm on my shoulder and an arm on Hatcher's shoulder. The legs trailed like logs. The shoes dug a furrow in the worn rug in the hall.

Hatcher began to pant right away. All that drinking had taken his wind. "He weighs a damn ton."

"It's just two flights down."

We got him down the stairs and through the kitchen and to the car. Hatcher kept him from falling while I opened the door and pulled the back of the seat forward. Then I went around to the other side and got in and Hatcher pushed and I pulled, and pretty soon Mr. Shalom was sitting in one corner in back like a wooden Indian.

"Get the bags," I told Hatcher. "I'll drive around front."

"Will he fall?"

"I don't think so, but what if he does?"

"Sure, just us chickens."

Hatcher took off and I chauffeured Mr. Shalom to the front of the hotel, lit a cigarette, and waited. The body remained seated in an upright

position. I kept the motor going and watched the windshield wipers thumping back and forth. It was still dark.

Miss Sabra ran out. "The porter," she said. "He insisted on getting our bags."

Hatcher and the porter came out together. The old man was burdened down with Mr. Shalom's canvas bag, an over-nighter for Miss Sabra, and Hatcher's flight bag. I hoped they would all fit under the hood of the VW. Otherwise we'd have to move the body to get at the luggage space behind the rear seat.

I yanked the hook lock release and got out and opened the snout of the VW. Canvas bag first, and then the over-nighter. I stuffed Hatcher's little grip in and slammed the hood down. It wouldn't lock. I got the flight bag out and tried again. The lock caught. Miss Sabra had climbed into the back of the car with the dead man. I dropped the flight bag at her feet and got behind the wheel alongside Hatcher:

"*Buon viaggio*," the man said. Hatcher gave him some change.

"*A rivederci*," I said.

I started driving.

"A thousand francs," Hatcher said. "Or maybe fifteen hundred."

"For what?"

"To fix my car."

"Work it out with Miss Sabra after we get to Geneva."

"She has the dough on her. I want it now."

"I'll give you the money later," Miss Sabra said.

"No. I want it now."

I heard her sigh from the back seat and her hand appeared with money. Hatcher took it and her hand went away.

The road starts climbing as soon as it leaves Domodossola. You turn left and there is a steep rise and then a switchback and you see the few early-morning lights of the town as you turn and start climbing again. Sempione, the sign says. Sempione is Simplon in Italian, and unless you want to drive through the tunnel of the Grand St. Bernard, where the border guards are snug and dry and might give you more of a once-over, it is the way to go.

I took the Italian side of the pass in second gear. The road was potholed after the winter snows and the early spring thaw. We rumbled and bounced along, reasonably warm with the heater and defroster going. I was chain-smoking and wished I had a drink. That was nothing compared to what Vinnie Hatcher was wishing. He couldn't keep his hands still. The sweat

stood out like droplets of oil on his face. He was staring straight ahead and seeing nothing and blinking rapidly.

I glanced at the rearview mirror every now and then. Miss Sabra sat very still, not quite in contact with the dead man but close enough to keep him from falling across the seat if a turn dislodged him. Her eyes were shut.

Ten kilometers this side of the frontier the night dark gave way to a dirty gray dawn. The rain had changed to snow, which seemed to fall from a point ahead of our headlights and move horizontally toward us and around us. There was snow on the high crags to our right and snow falling into the still-dark chasm to our left. We turned into a long narrow valley that followed a riverbed and then there were patches of snow on the road, and soon more snow than potholed frost-buckled blacktop, and finally all snow, fresh powder a couple of inches deep and ours the only tiretracks on it.

"You got chains?" Hatcher asked.

"Yeah, but we ought to be able to make it without them."

"You're the jock."

With the weight of its engine in back over the rear wheels, the VW surged forward. A low cloud hung over the road and

enveloped us like thick white smoke. I took my foot off the gas pedal to slow down and stared through the windshield. I could see almost nothing. The road curved to the right gradually and then very sharply.

I turned the wheel hard and we fishtailed a few yards and found traction again. I heard movement in the back seat and took a quick glance at the rearview mirror. The wooden Indian had fallen across Miss Sabra's lap. She was trying to right him and biting down hard on her lip, her eyes tight shut.

"He's so cold," she said.
"He's so cold."

They gave us no trouble on the Italian side of the frontier. A man poked his head out of the shack and said in very bad French that I had to hand in my gasoline carnet. That was no problem, since they had given it to me on the way down from Switzerland. It entitled me to a tourist rake-off at gas stations in Italy. I handed it over and we were waved ahead. Nobody even looked at our passports.

We drove for a while through the high timberline no-man's-land between countries. I threw away my empty pack of cigarettes and started a fresh one.

Ahead a big Swiss flag was flapping in the wind and snow. The road widened into four

lanes and went under a big roof on stanchions and I followed a yellow arrow to the control point. A tall Swiss border guard in a loden cape and a big campaign hat came out as I rolled the window down.

"Gruss Gott."

"Gruss Gott."

He had taken a look at the license plate first. I didn't like that. If you have a foreign plate, they will glance at your passports, ask if you have anything to declare and expect a negative answer, look at your car papers, and send you on your way. If you have a Swiss plate they will examine your luggage. If you have, as I had, a Swiss "Z" plate—the "Z" standing for temporary resident—it could go either way.

"Passports."

I had already collected the passports. All four, including the two ersatz ones, were American. That was good. Four people in a car in the wee hours of the morning ought to be from the same country.

He held the passports under the brim of the big campaign hat and flipped through them. He handed them back.

"Green card," he said in French.

That was to establish the fact that I was carrying the right kind of international insurance for the car. I gave him

the little green booklet and he flipped through that, too, and found the date and nodded and returned it to me.

"Have you anything to declare?" he said. He sounded bored. I was glad he was bored.

I was about to say no.

Vinnie Hatcher beat me to the punch. He said, "*Oui, monsieur.*"

I had my hand in the pocket of my raincoat and the butt of the gun in it and the muzzle against Hatcher's thigh before anyone said anything else. What happened next would depend on how scared Hatcher was. If he was calm enough to realize that the gun would do me as much good here as an extra pack of cigarettes, we were all through.

"Yes?" the border guard said, in English this time and a little less bored.

Hatcher stared past me at the blur of a face under the campaign hat. He looked on the point of speaking. A muscle in his cheek twitched. I jabbed the gun against him hard, wondering what the hell I could declare now that Hatcher had opened his mouth—assuming he would say nothing else.

"Yes?" the border guard said again. There was a light in the window of the office behind him and a few other guards

sitting around a table, probably waiting for their buddy to return to their card game.

"Wrist watch," I said, poking my left hand through the rolled down window and showing him the watch.

He looked at it. "But it is Swiss."

"Bought it in Italy."

He gave me the sort of look that said what he thought of anyone foolish enough to buy a Swiss watch in Italy and pay the duty both places.

"You have a receipt?"

"I lost it."

"How much did it cost?"

"Twenty-five thousand lire,"

I said. "They told me it was a bargain."

He looked at the watch. He hadn't asked me to take it off yet. If he did I was all through because then I'd have to take my hand off the gun. Even if he didn't I was all through if he kept us much longer because Hatcher, even if he was scared blue, as apparently he was, would begin to get the idea I was helpless.

"Twenty-five thousand lire," he said. "Then in that case there is no duty."

Twenty-five thousand lire is less than fifty bucks.

"Anything else?"

"No," I said, fast.

The campaign hat moved toward me and looked past me at

Hatcher and then moved to the side back window for a look at Miss Sabra and Mr. Shalom. The face under the campaign hat grinned. "Sleeping," it said.

"We had a long drive."

"From where?"

"Rome," I said.

"Welcome back to Switzerland."

A big hand touched the brim of the campaign hat, and I put the car in gear and we were in Switzerland.

I drove maybe five kilometers through the snow, past earth-moving equipment and steamrollers and a sign that said to watch out for road work, though the workers hadn't arrived on the job and probably wouldn't today now that it was snowing. I found an overlook with a fine view of a dense cloud and pulled off the road.

Hatcher gave me a quick frightened look. "What are you going to do?"

"Talk," I said.

"So talk."

"You insisted on payment to repair your car in advance," I said. "But you didn't stay back there to get it done. That should have told me."

"Told you what?"

"Not to mention driving into a ditch in the first place. I ought to break your back."

Hatcher just licked his lips.

"You were going to declare a dead man, weren't you? That's why you came with us. That would have been one way of proving Mr. Shalom was in Italy."

"I didn't."

"Get out of the car," I said. "And don't try to make a run for it."

He got out and I got out with the gun in my hand. I frisked him and found his own hardware. It was a Luger. Something small and hard was in his raincoat pocket with it. I jammed the Luger into my own pocket.

"Who are you working for?"

"A guy," he said. "A guy in Geneva."

I hit him.

"I swear I don't know his name. He wanted the deal stopped, that's all. Like by accident, without any involvement on his part. You know?"

"No, tell me."

"An accident, so the cops would come. But then Shalom got sick so I figured that would be even better. He had a bad heart. He'd need a doctor."

"Only he died."

"And the girl called you."

By then he was over his fright and smirking. He still had us, short of my killing him. All he had to do was reach a phone and say a dead man had just been transported across the bor-

der. He could even wait until we reached Geneva to do that and someone would check with the frontier station where the guard would remember the old man sleeping in the back of the car, and it might not be enough to prove anything in a court of law but it would be enough to make Mr. Milo call the deal off. Not as good as the accident in Domodossola, not as good as a dead man at the border itself, but plenty good enough if Milo was as nervous as Miss Sabra thought he was.

I wasn't in this deep enough to kill Hatcher. I had just been hired to do a job. I felt sorry for Miss Sabra, but there was nothing I could do.

"Is it going to be all right?" Miss Sabra asked from the car.

I didn't know what to tell her.

"Do we get to drive on now, boss?" Vinnie Hatcher smirked.

On one of those hunches that are all you have left I said, "Let's see what else is in your pocket, Vinnie."

"There's nothing," he said.

But he stood still while I reached into his pocket again and found the small hard something and withdrew it.

That left me holding a small unlabeled pill bottle in my hand—dark green glass, a plastic screw-on cap, and a single pill inside.

I unscrewed the cap one-handed and held the bottle out toward Vinnie. "Take it," I said.

"Are you nuts or something?"

"Take it, I said."

He shook his head.

"What is it?"

"Pep pill, for when I'm not drinking."

"You're not drinking now. Take it."

He stood there in the snow, looking at the bottle and the single pill. He shook his head.

"What kind of heart disease did Mr. Shalom have?" I asked the girl.

"Angina."

"He have pills for it?"

"A glycerine compound. You put them under the tongue. They always worked before."

"You have them?"

"Yes."

"Let's have a look."

She handed a pill bottle out the front window on the driver's side, a bottle the same size as Hatcher's but amber instead of green. There was a label from the Pharmacie Principale in Geneva.

Most of the time, if you can pop a pill in your mouth, angina is a painful but not a fatal disease.

The little white pills were the same size as Vinnie's.

"Could he have switched them on you?" I asked.

"I—yes!" Her dark eyes narrowed. "I was nervous. I dropped the bottle. He picked it up and opened it for me. He could have had his own pill ready."

"That's crazy," Vinnie Hatcher said.

He said nothing else for about ten seconds. Then he said, "What the hell, I'll take it, if it will convince you I didn't kill the old man."

He took the green bottle. He swallowed the pill.

"See?" he laughed. "Quick-acting poison. I'm dead only I don't know it."

"It probably is a pep pill," I said. "Not giving Mr. Shalom his own medicine was enough to kill him. If he couldn't be found in Italy alive you decided he'd be found there dead."

Hatcher said nothing.

"Didn't you?"

Hatcher shrugged. "You'd have a rough time proving that in court. Can we get in-out of the hot sun now, boss?"

He still had us, and he still knew it.

Miss Sabra asked, in a very calm voice, "Are you quite sure that was the way it happened, Mr. Drum?"

"I'm sure, but I can't prove it."

In the same calm voice:

"Would you stand aside, please, Mr. Drum?"

I looked at her. She had a small handgun. Later, before I disposed of it, I learned it was a Berretta.

Vinnie Hatcher looked where I was looking. He turned and started running and the small handgun made a flat sound and spurted orange, just once. Hatcher kept running three more steps to the edge of the overlook, out of control now and either hit or not hit, and struck the guard rail with his legs and went on over headfirst, soaring for an instant, completely clear of the ground, and then down into the low cloud and gone in it. A few seconds later we heard him striking rock and bouncing and striking again out of sight far below.

I didn't say anything. I got back into the car and shut the

door on the other side and on my side. I started driving. We went through a short tunnel and met our first traffic coming up the other way, a rattling little 2CV Citroën. It went past and there was a water runoff from the roof of the tunnel and we were through that and out the other side. It was snowing harder.

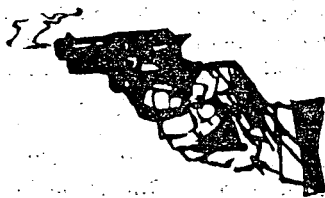
Finally Miss Sabra said, "Are you going to report this?"

"Give me your gun," I said.

She gave it to me, and I shoved it in my pocket. She didn't ask any more questions.

It was like the pep pill all over again. If she hadn't hit him, he'd have gone over the guard rail under his own steam. No matter what it said in the papers in a week or a month, after they found the body.

"You sure are a lousy shot," I said. "You missed him by a mile."



NEVER PUBLISHED BEFORE

Lawrence G. Blochman

The Fayot Murder

From the fashionable, snobbish Nice of pampered women and dogs, gilded casinos, and spotless stucco palaces with liveried flunkies, it is only a step to the Nice of age-browned crooked plaster houses, green shutters open at all angles, and washing suspended from all floors to catch whatever sunshine strays beyond the dull-red roofs.

Into this paradoxical setting Lawrence G. Blochman introduces a vacationing newspaperman named Lubin, who shares a love of good wine with Emile Delorde, chief of the Brigade Mondaine, and some officers and men of the Sixth Fleet, whose welfare becomes not so much a cause celebre as a cause sympathique. . .

Detective: LUBIN

If I had not been fifteen minutes early for my luncheon date with Emile Delorde I would never have been involved in the Fayot murder. I am not one of those newspapermen who are always trying to outsmart police detectives. I have been an inside man most of my career and for my vacation in Nice I was simply a refugee from the night desk of the *Paris Herald* looking for a few weeks of daytime living in the well-

advertised sunshine of the Riviera.

True, Delorde was chief of the Brigade Mondaine—the Mundane Squad—detectives who deal with gambling, dope pushers, prostitutes, and *proxénètes* (an elegant French word for pimps), but our friendship had nothing to do with crime. We were just two overweight guys—I always thought Delorde was too plump, round-faced, and good-humored to be a

tough cop—who shared an admiration for good food and wine.

When I phoned him on my arrival, he told me about a little tavern specializing in the wine of the country that had just laid in a cellarful of Bellet, the flowery little amber nectar of which the Niçois are justly proud. It was to sample the Bellet with Delorde that I found myself at noon next day threading the somber corridors of police headquarters.

I sat down in Delorde's anteroom to await the chief's leisure. Opposite the desk sergeant I noted a young man in an American naval uniform with a petty-officer rating on his sleeve. He was sitting with his elbows on his knees, twisting his white hat in his hands and staring at the floor with the hopelessness that overtakes a man when he needs to speak a foreign language he does not know. Next to him was a slight cool-eyed girl in her mid-twenties with a worldly tilt to her blonde head. She crossed and uncrossed her legs while she answered the sergeant's questions as though she were throwing scraps to a dog.

These international romances were far from rare since the Sixth Fleet had started staking out the Mediterranean as a Mare Nostrum for the United States.

Navy. I wondered idly what had gone wrong with this one that the law had intervened. Since we were in the anteroom of the Mundane Squad I could make an educated guess, but I was surprised that a seafaring man, particularly one without linguistic skills, should have chosen to involve himself in the girl's troubles. I was even intrigued.

"Can I help you, sailor?" I asked.

"Hey, thanks." The navy's spirits were suddenly revived by the sound of English. "Maybe you can tell me what's going on. I can't talk this lingo. They picked Ninette up when we were coming out of a café, and they tried to stop me, but I came along. They think she's a hooker, I suppose, but she's not. We're going to get married. Aren't we, Ninette?"

Ninette turned to look at him, and the fury faded from her pale gray eyes. For an instant they became sad, then tender, with the sadness of lost illusions and the tenderness of a hopeful willingness to build new ones. There was something about their expression in the split second between changes, however, that made me uneasy. Was it fear? Guilt? Before I could decide, she had resumed her angry exchange with the sergeant.

I looked more closely at the

bride-to-be. I would not have taken her for a trollop. She was not well enough dressed for a *poule de luxe*, and she lacked the hard-bitten coarseness of a street girl, even when she was most vehement. There was no jewelry on the slim fingers she was shaking at the sergeant. She had poise even if it had not been acquired in the drawing room. Her small turned-up Parisian nose quivered with indignation at the sergeant's remarks.

"Just because a girl walks down the street with an American sailor you think she's a *putain*," she said. "What a twisted mind!"

The sergeant laughed knowingly. Below his luxuriant mustache two front teeth were missing. "American sailors are better paid than French sailors," he said.

"*Flic!*" The girl spat the French word for "cop" as if it was a nasty worm. "You *flics* consider love strictly in terms of francs."

"Or dollars. For French girls and American sailors, yes. For girls like you, yes. In Nice, certainly yes. I would like to meet you on the Promenade des Anglais in civilian clothes—"

"And I would knock out two more of your teeth!"

I liked the way the girl was handling herself. Her anger, expressed by her whole body,

burned with the fire of conviction. This sailor meant something to her, and she was going to fight for him. She was no babe in arms, but she seemed sincere. For the moment I forgot my uneasy feeling.

"So you're getting married." The sergeant became sarcastically solicitous. "When?"

"When his ship gets to Marseilles. There will be more time for the papers at the consulate and *mairie*."

"I regret infinitely"—a crenelated grin—"it will be impossible."

"You know nothing about it."

"But I do. The American consul will be on vacation when the sailor calls. He always is. He won't be back until after the ship sails. He never is." Another laugh. "You will live in America, of course?"

"Certainly. Women are respected there. Frenchmen disgust me."

"Men," said the sergeant, trying to look philosophical, "are men, no matter what language they speak. One finds that out soon enough in our business. You must have found it out in yours."

"Your business!" Ninette sniffed. "I spit on your business!"

A door opened and a pair of heavyweights of the Brigade

Mondaine summoned the girl.

"Viens, poupoule," said one.
"Come on, chick."

Ninette looked the other way.

"Will mademoiselle deign to enter?"

Mademoiselle did.

When the door had closed, the sailor turned to me. "What's happening?" he asked. "Can you make it out?"

I explained that a wave of puritanism had engulfed La Belle France under DeGaulle and that the *joie de vivre* which once marked French life had been severely restricted by laws which had made the sporting house and the street walker illegal.

"Then they do take Ninette for a hooker?"

I nodded.

"They're crazy," he said. "Cops are stupid everywhere. I'm not just out of boot camp. I was in the old Peoria in the Bosphorus before I joined the Ferret, I've been ashore in Port Said and Constantinople. I know those little alleys back of the old port in Marseilles, too. But Ninette's different."

He was a soft-spoken boy and his handsome, deep-set black eyes were full of southern chivalry if not of profound understanding. He had been around, as he said, but he carried his native artlessness

around with him. I, too, might have thought he was on his first cruise had I not noted the red hashmark on his sleeve.

"I'm from the South," he said. "My folks have a farm in Georgia. I get paid off when the division gets back home this summer, and I want to take Ninette home with me."

"Do you think she'll be happy in a strange country, among people who think all foreigners are agents of the devil?"

"She's got an older sister married to a GI and living in America," the sailor said. "I'm going to take back a package for her. Her sister wrote Ninette she has a yen for those candied fruits they have in that big store under the arcades on the square across from the Casino."

I nodded. Vogade on the Place Masséna was noted for its crystallized fruits. "How long have you known Ninette?"

"Two months. I met her in Tunisia. She worked in a café in Bizerta. We were together all the time the ship was around North Africa. When we crossed over to France, she gave up her job and came over, too. She's on the level."

Ninette reappeared between the two detectives. She smiled briefly for the sailor, then flashed me a hostile glance when she became aware that we were talking English.

"Which is the fiancé?" asked one of the detectives.

The desk sergeant nodded toward the sailor. The detective looked at him from beneath shaggy eyebrows, half incredulously, half compassionately.

"Go and get married then," he said.

The sailor stood up. Ninette grabbed his arm and started out, but he held back to say thanks and ask if he could buy me a beer when he got shore leave again in a day or so. I don't know why I said yes, except for the way the girl was glaring at me.

"Yes, let's have a beer together," I said. "I'm at the Savoy on the Promenade des Anglais: Lubin, Room 212. Call me."

The girl glared at me again.

As she passed the sergeant he left off toying with his cavalry mustache, leaned over, and pinched a well-molded thigh. "Drop me a postcard from America," he said.

The indignant Ninette released the sailor's arm, spun about, grabbed the sergeant's mustache with both hands, and tugged until his head bobbed twice. Then she was gone, pushing her sailor ahead of her.

The two detectives found the spectacle highly entertaining and expressed themselves boisterously.

"*Mon pauvre vieux Fayot,*" one of them said. "At your age you should know better than to trifle with a woman."

At this point Emile Delorde emerged from his sanctum, put his left arm around my shoulders, and shook hands with his right. "*Allons-y,*" he said.

He was right about the Bellet. It was fragrant and unpretentious, and it made a perfect accompaniment to the fresh-caught trout *au bleu*.

Next evening in the Savoy bar I rescued two young American ensigns from a Russian danseuse who was giving them a hard-luck story. Apparently my vacation was destined to be devoted to the welfare of the officers and men of the United States Navy. As I had already heard Sonya's story twice—she had no memory for faces—I offered to fill in the blanks and save the lads from growing over-charitable. She had them drinking *pastis*, after all, that licorice-flavored tiger's milk of the Mediterranean littoral which can make strong men weep and the timorous brave.

After Sonya had left in a huff, the two ensigns—Hicks and Jones—and I cemented our new friendship with good brandy, and they invited me aboard their destroyer, which had left the division at Ville-

franche and was tied up at Nice proper for supplies. They wanted my opinion on some Madeira they had picked up at Funchal. I promised to come next day and we said goodnight. As I signed my check I ordered a bottle of Armagnac sent up to my room.

I was just about to step into the shower when there was a determined knock on the door. Surprised at the promptness of the usually snail-paced room service, I girded myself with a towel and went to open. I had scarcely turned the knob when the door banged back against me and a flurry of opera-pink skirts swept into the room. A woman whirled, slammed the door, threw the bolt, and turned to face me.

It was Ninette.

"*Tiens!*" I said. "Why am I so honored?"

The girl paused a few seconds to catch her breath. "You're making fun of me."

"Not at all. I'm just surprised."

Ninette backed against the edge of my bed and sat down. She was still breathing audibly, but was doing her best to appear calm and collected. She clasped her hands tightly in her lap as if to keep them from trembling. She gave me that same enigmatic stare that had previously made me uneasy.

"Where's your fiancé?"

"Jerry's on his ship." A long pause. Then, "Are you trying to keep me from marrying him?"

"Not at all. Why should I? You love him, don't you?" I sat on the bed beside her.

"Oh yes, I do. I couldn't have said that truthfully two weeks ago, but it's true now."

"Do you know what you're in for, living on a farm in the American South? It's not like the South of France, you know. Do you think you'll be happy?"

"With Jerry, yes. Anywhere. I want to start over. I hate Europe."

"And Africa?"

"Doubly. It stinks."

"How long has your sister lived in America?"

Ninette moistened her lips with the tip of her tongue. "Give me a cigarette."

I laughed. "I don't happen to have one in my pocket. If you wait, I'll get dressed."

"Never mind." That hard as nails glance again. "You're with Interpol, aren't you?"

"No."

"The C.I.A. then." I shook my head. "The American Customs? The Narcotics Bureau?"

I chuckled. "I'm just a newspaperman on vacation."

"I don't believe you. You're some kind of flatfoot. Otherwise what were you doing in the police station?"

"Waiting to go to lunch with the boss, who happens to be a friend of mine."

There was a knock on the door. I got up. So did Ninette.

"Don't open," she whispered. Her nails dug into my arm.

I smiled and disengaged myself. "It's just a chasseur with some brandy I ordered."

Ninette scurried around the foot of the bed and disappeared into the bathroom.

I opened the door, took the bottle from the tray, signed the check, and dismissed the waiter.

"You can come out now, mademoiselle, I'm alone," I said, shutting the door.

She didn't come.

I entered without knocking. She was perched tensely on the rim of the tub, and sprang up as I pushed the door inward.

"Drink this." I poured the Armagnac into the bathroom glass. "It will give you courage."

She downed it in one gulp. "What are you afraid of?" I asked her.

"You." She held out her glass. "Among other things. Listen. Swear that you will not stop me from marrying Jerry and going to America."

"I've already told you that I have no reason for interfering in your personal affairs."

"Swear it, then. Swear it on

the head of your mother."

I wanted to smile, but Ninette was deadly serious. I raised my right hand. "I swear it."

Someone was at the door again, rapping repeatedly.

"Don't open!" I thought the girl was going to faint. "Please."

She did not reckon with my professional curiosity. I snatched my bathrobe from its hook and slipped it on as I started out. Ninette tried to catch my arm. When she failed, she pushed the bathroom door shut behind me.

The knocking became more imperious.

The girl's apprehension was apparently contagious. With unusual caution I first braced myself against the door, then opened only a few inches. I did not like what I saw.

I was first struck by the simian cast of the man's features. His black hair came down within an inch of his furry eyebrows. His cheeks were flat and the whole angle of his face slanted forward to his broad chin. His eyes scared the day-lights out of me. They were cruel eyes that seemed to burn deep inside with irresistible fascination—the eyes of His Satanic Majesty in whom I had not believed until this moment.

"*Vous vous etes trompe,*" I said. "You must have the wrong room."

Without a word he tried to force his way in. I pushed back. He was a broad-shouldered brute, but since he was half a head shorter than I and did not outweigh me, I managed to bar the way. He got his head far enough beyond the edge of the door, however, to take a good look around the room. Then he muttered something about maybe having made a mistake and backed away.

"You can come out now," I said in the direction of the bathroom. "Our visitor decided not to stay."

She emerged, bringing the Armagnac and glasses. I thought the level in the bottle had gone down.

"Who is this entrancing creature you seem to be hiding from?" I asked.

"A Corsican I used to know." She shrugged. "I never knew his real name."

"Come now, Ninette. You don't expect me to believe that."

"It's true. In Bizerta they called him Jojo le Dur."

I could believe that. In the argot of the French half world, a *dur* is a big-time tough, and Jojo looked the part.

"What's Jojo got on you?"

"Nothing, but he's been after me for a year. I thought I'd ditched him when I left Tunisia. I didn't know he'd followed me

to Nice. I don't want to see him."

"Is he the reason you want to go to America?"

"People like him, yes." She hesitated. "May I spend the night here, monsieur?"

"No." Perhaps I was too short. I smiled. "Jerry wouldn't like it."

"Jerry trusts me."

"I'm not sure I do." I had a brainstorm. "What is your sister's address in New York?"

"I don't remember." A pause. "Some street with a direction and a number. I have it written down somewhere."

"Did you write it down for Jerry so he'll know where to deliver Vogade's candied fruits?"

"Jerry is not taking any candied fruits to America. Where did you get that idea?"

"From Jerry."

"He was mistaken. You can tell Interpol or the C.I.A. or whatever you work for that he is taking no candied fruits."

"Won't your sister be disappointed?"

She stood up. "You and your tricky word games!" That enigmatic expression that had made me so uneasy was back again. "If you won't offer me hospitality for the night, I had better go. Would you look and see if there is anyone in the hall?"

I looked in both directions. "No Corsicans," I reported.

"Thank you for the Armagnac, monsieur, and for your assurance of neutrality. If you are telling the truth. Don't forget that you swore on the head of your mother." She stood on tiptoe and kissed my cheek. "Goodnight."

I watched her as she walked down the corridor, and, I thought, out of my life.

There is no denying that Nice is a beautiful place when the sun is shining. It was shining the next afternoon when I went to pass judgment on the wine the United States Navy had smuggled out of Madeira. The waters of the tiny port and the Mediterranean beyond the white breakwater could not have been bluer. The restful green of Mont Boron with its white, red-roofed villas gleaming among the trees seemed to give the lie to the bustle of commerce going on about me as I walked along the Quai Lunel toward the little gray warship berthed behind a Corsican mail steamer. Four sailors in dungarees were playing catch on the dock as I walked up the gangplank and went aft to the wardroom.

Ensign Hicks was right about his "stuff." There was nothing wrong with the Madeira he and

Ensign Jones had stowed under their bunks—a case of Bual and one of Malmsey. The Malmsey was a little on the sweet side for my jaded taste buds, but the Bual was superb. I was allowing my palate to savor its velvety smoothness when I noted the bronze letters fixed across the forward bulkhead of the wardroom: U.S.S. FERRET. The events of the past few days came crowding into my consciousness. I asked:

"Have you a machinist's mate named Jerry aboard? A rather good-looking boy from Georgia?"

Hicks was running over the roster in his mind. "Why?"

I told about our encounter in the police station and my subsequent meeting with the girl he was determined to marry.

"It's Harley," said Jones.

"That dumbbell!" said Hicks, reaching for the bottle. "He's been trying to get married in every port we've touched since we left Copenhagen last summer."

Ensign Jones stuck his head beyond the bulkhead and shouted. "When's Harley's liberty up?" he asked the petty officer who came clanking down the steel companionway.

"I was just about to tell you about Harley, sir," said the boatswain's mate. "Word just

came aboard."

"When *he* comes aboard, tell him I want to see him."

"Yes, sir. But I'm afraid he'll be overleave tonight. He's in jail."

"You mean he's playing cards with the off-watch of the shore patrol?"

"No, sir. They say he's mixed up in a murder and will have to stand civil trial."

I emptied my glass, thanked the young officers for their excellent Madeira, and departed. Willynilly, the United States Navy had definitely invaded my vacation.

I drove my rented Citroën to the headquarters of the Brigade Mondaïne and accosted Emile Delorde.

"What goes on, Monsieur le Commissaire?" I asked indignantly. When I used his formal title, he knew I was displeased about something. "Why are you declaring war on the U.S. Navy?"

Delorde was equally indignant. "Your sailor shot poor old Fayot, a police sergeant with twenty years' service. Too bad he is your compatriot, my friend, because if he does not go to the guillotine, there is no justice in France."

"Why is he accused of killing the sergeant?"

"Because he admits it. There

was a woman involved, as always. The murder was committed in the woman's room in a cheap lodging house in Old Nice."

"This Sergeant Fayot—was he a middle-aged man with a long face, a handlebar mustache, and two front teeth missing?"

"Ah. You knew him?"

"I've seen him."

"He was a real professional—we shall miss him."

I couldn't quite picture Jerry Harley shooting a cop. He would fight for his girl, certainly, but in good old Georgia tradition—with his fists. Still, in this age of dissent . . .

"How was he arrested?" I asked.

"Two policemen in the street heard the shots. As soon as they located the house, they rushed upstairs and found the sailor standing over the body—"

"With a smoking pistol in his hand, of course."

"Well, no. That point is somewhat puzzling. The sailor says he threw the gun out the window. We haven't found it yet but as soon as he was taken in, he admitted the shooting."

Here was a complete case: a corpus delicti, a confession, an arrest. From here on it was in the hands of the examining magistrate. I asked Delorde if I could see Harley.

"The American consul will see him tomorrow and get a lawyer for him," he said. But he wrote me a permit anyhow.

Harley was sitting on a greasy bench in a dark evil-smelling cell. Having appraised the cleanliness of the jail, he had turned back his cuffs and tucked in his floppy collar to spare the white braid. I noted the Statue of Liberty tattooed on one arm. He was both pleased and embarrassed to see me.

I had only ten minutes so I wasted no time. "Has Ninette been to see you?"

"I didn't want her to come."

"So you've talked to her since the shooting. Why wasn't she in the room when the police arrived?"

Harley wasn't quick enough to lie. He gazed at the lobe of my left ear.

"Are you tired of living," I said, "that you have to lie your way to the guillotine?"

At the word "guillotine" he shifted his gaze to the lobe of my right ear. "I'm not lying," he said. "I haven't said anything that's not true."

"Look," I said, "shielding a woman is all very fine, if that's what you're doing, but killing a cop is a serious crime anywhere, and a French jury is not likely to consider a gesture of south-

ern chivalry as an extenuating circumstance. And don't forget that in France capital punishment is a matter of cold steel on the nape of your neck. Better level with me."

This time Harley looked me full in the face. He made a helpless gesture. "But I love Ninette," he said. "What can I do?"

"Listen, Harley. It's none of my business, but I don't like the idea of your head dropping into a basket at four o'clock some morning. All you're doing now is bucking for that privilege without helping the girl one bit. Has she still got the gun on her?"

Harley's mouth opened and closed. "I don't think Ninette ever had a gun."

"Then you didn't see her after the sergeant was shot?"

"No," he said. "She'd cleared out."

He told me the story from the beginning. He and Ninette were eating ravioli in an all-night place when the sergeant with the big mustache walked in and said something to Ninette that made her furious. She snapped at him. When he went on talking, she first turned pale, then calmed down and seemed quite reasonable. The sergeant grinned smugly and left.

Harley hadn't understood what they were talking about,

but Ninette explained that she had made up with the sergeant and that he was coming to see her in the morning to straighten things out. "So don't barge in and spoil everything," she had told him. "Stay away till noon."

He wasn't going to try to see her before noon, but he felt it wouldn't hurt if he sort of stood guard by being in the neighborhood. He went to the little bistro across the street at about ten or ten-thirty.

"They have this pink wine they draw from a barrel there, so I sat down and ordered a glass. I was nursing it when I saw this horse-faced cop come along and go into her house. I finished the wine and kept watching the window on the third floor for a time, but nothing happened. I had another glass, but when nobody came out I thought I ought to investigate. I was paying my check when I heard two shots. I beat it across the street and up the stairs.

"Her door was locked, but she'd given me a key. The cop was flat on the floor with blood oozing out of his mouth and chest. Ninette was gone—"

"Is there a back door?"

"Yes. You go out through the kitchen and there's a stairway goes down to the bathroom on the next floor and

then out to the back alley. Well, I was bending over this sergeant to see if I could do anything for him when two cops came in. I thought I'd tell 'em I did it so Ninette would have time to get away. They haven't started looking for her, have they?"

"Do you think she did it?"

"She hated all cops, but I thought she'd made up with this one."

"Do you know where she is now?"

"No, but I'm not worried. She'll go to Marseilles and get in touch with me when the *Ferret* comes in. You won't tell the police, will you?"

I said no, of course not. I did not say I wouldn't have to.

When I left him I went back to see Delorde.

"You!" he exclaimed. "You have joined my service then?"

"Temporarily. To help you solve the Fayot murder."

"There is no mystery. The murderer is in jail."

"Have you the keys to the room in which Fayot was killed?"

"I have," said Delorde. "They will be turned over to the Juge d'Instruction tomorrow. He will no doubt want to have a reenactment of the crime."

"If you could spare twenty minutes to come with me now," I said, "I may be able to

spare you the embarrassment of having the examining magistrate reenact the crime with the wrong man."

Delorde frowned. "We have an oral confession."

"I've been thinking of giving you half a case of that Châteauneuf de Pape 1949 I picked up last month. I don't have to remind you that '49 was a great year for Rhone Valley reds."

Delorde advanced his lips in what was intended to be a stern pout but which turned out to be a reluctant smile.

"Twenty minutes," he said.

We walked down into the narrow terraced streets of Old Nice, the Nice that has remained Italian. From the fashionable, snobbish Nice of pampered women and dogs, gilded casinos and spotless stucco palaces with liveried flunkies, it is only a step to the Nice of age-browned crooked plaster houses, green shutters open at all angles, and washing suspended from all floors to catch whatever sunshine strays beyond the dull-red roofs. As we waded through swarms of noisy, dirty children, where the smell of open drains competed with the aroma of garlic, goat cheese, and anchovies from the cavelike shops, Delorde pointed to a door just ahead and said: "That building is the scene of the crime."

I took his arm and led him in the direction of the bistro across the street. "I understand they have a very decent Cap Corse in here. Let's have a small libation before we climb."

He made a slight why-not movement of his head but specified: "Remember. Only twenty minutes."

We bellied up to the zinc-topped bar and the *patron* drew two generous goblets from one of his barrels. We raised our glasses. The Commissaire took a sip of the tourmaline-colored wine and his eyebrows went up in favorable appraisal.

I questioned the proprietor in an unnecessarily loud voice. "Do you know an American sailor when you see one?"

"Certainly," said the *patron*. "I used to live in Villefranche. And there is one who has been coming often to the house across the street."

"Have you seen him today?"

"He had a glass or two of Cap Corse this morning. *Tiens*, about the time of the shooting."

"Did you hear the shot?" I asked, looking at Delorde.

"Shots," the *patron* corrected. "There were two."

Delorde set his glass down suddenly on the zinc. He took my arm as though to say, "This is a professional matter—amateurs keep out—I will frame

the next question myself." "This sailor," he said aloud, "left here just before you heard the shots, *n'est-ce pas?*"

"No, monsieur. Just after."
"Sure?"

"Positive. I was counting the change for a fifty-franc note he had given me. The shots startled me. I had to start counting all over again."

Delorde drained his glass. "Let us return to our sheep," he said.

Ninette's room had been left untouched for the examining magistrate. It was a cold high-ceilinged room smelling of dampness with overtones of cooking. A chipped washbasin full of soapy water stood on a marble-topped stand. A blue enameled pitcher sat under it. Draped over the edge was a towel smudged with rouge. A woman's underthings hung on the back of a chair. There were dark stains on the bare red-tiled floor. From the yellowed wall a Christ looked down on the bed from a cheap crucifix. On the rumpled quilt at the foot of the bed lay a gray coat mottled with dried blood, obviously Sergeant Fayot's.

On top of a battered dresser there were scattered a few pieces of costume jewelry and a considerable quantity of loose candied fruits—apricots, figs,

greengages, cherries, kumquats, and, shining among them like so many purple stars, crystallized violets.

"If you look in the kitchen, Monsieur le Commissaire," I said, "you may find out why only the sailor was here when the police arrived."

While Delorde was poking about in the kitchen, I was exploring the pockets of the dead man's coat. In an inside pocket I found a sheaf of official-looking papers, the type-written text of which was obliterated in spots by bloodstains.

Sergeant Fayot indeed knew his business thoroughly. Ninette refused to fit into one of the neat categories that a policeman's mind provides for women. She had no right to refuse. He would go out of his way to make her fit. A query to Paris had brought a reply from the Quai des Orfèvres and a copy of a ten-year-old police record for one Ninette Lefranc.

Ninette had come to Paris from a small provincial town, perhaps to escape the restrictions of a hidebound family, perhaps because she had no family, perhaps because she longed for the mundane pleasures of the capital. At any rate, the record showed that at the age of seventeen she had been caught in a *rafle*—a mass police raid—on a tawdry dance hall

executed in accordance with Gaullist blue laws. Whether or not the young Ninette had been aware of the fact that dancing was only a by-product of the establishment made no difference. She was sentenced to thirty days in prison for frequenting premises devoted to prostitution, and an extra thirty days for slapping the cop who arrested her.

"Commissaire," I said as Delorde came from the kitchen with the outer doorknob, the shaft carefully grasped between thumb and forefinger, "I suppose it's against the law to touch this stuff, but I promise to put it back. Read this."

I held the papers so he would not have to relinquish the doorknob, then replaced them in Fayot's coat.

Delorde was pensive for a moment. He saw how the dossier was a weapon in Fayot's hands, a threat to Ninette's romantic dream of a new life in America. "You are suggesting a new suspect," he said at last. "But why then didn't the girl destroy the papers if she killed Fayot?"

"I don't know," I said. There were a lot of things I didn't know, but I was beginning to guess at some of them.

I went back to the station. I wanted to look at some mug shots while he turned his print

men loose on the doorknob.

I must have spent an hour looking through photos of pimps, gamblers, and dope pushers. I still had a pile of twenty or thirty ahead of me when Delorde came in wearing a smug half smile.

"There has been a curious development," he said. "We have recovered prints from the doorknob which we have in our files. They belong to a small-time runner for a gang that used to smuggle in American cigarettes, penicillin and cocaine from Monaco and the Italian border. His name is Georges Cantini. He hasn't been seen on the Riviera since he got out of jail six years ago."

"A Corsican?"

"From Ajaccio." Delorde nodded. "We'd lost track of him."

"Short, squat character with simian features and black hair? Almost no forehead?"

"You know him?" Delorde's mouth fell open. Then he saw the pile of photos and smiled. "I see. You came across him."

I hadn't but I didn't say so. "Do you know where he is?" I asked.

"No, but we'll find him, even if his old gang has broken up. It is just a matter of days."

"I think I can make it a matter of hours," I said, "if you turn the sailor loose."

"Impossible. At least until we find the girl or the Corsican."

"His ship sails for Marseilles tomorrow. If he's not aboard, I can't help you. If necessary you could always take him off the ship at Marseilles."

Delorde filled his pipe with woolly gray French tobacco that uncured as he lit it and showered sparks down the front of his jacket. He swatted himself desperately.

"What do you know about Cantini?"

"Nothing, except that he's been in Tunisia where he was known as Jojo le Dur."

"The sailor has just come from Tunisia. Do you think he and Cantini were up to something?"

"Possibly."

"Then why should I let him go?"

"Because I have a working hypothesis. You'll have to trust me."

More pyrotechnics erupted from Delorde's pipe as he puffed thoughtfully. "Will you lead us to Cantini then?"

"As soon as Jerry Harley is aboard the *U.S.S. Ferret*."

Delorde made a face and puffed furiously. I reminded him of the alibi that the bistro proprietor had given Harley. He reminded me that nine out of ten bistro proprietors in Old

Nice would lie their heads off for a few thousand francs. I reminded him of the fact that he had found the prints of a known crook on the back door of the murder scene. He reminded me that both the crook and the sailor were recent arrivals from Tunisia and he was still not convinced that the two were not conniving at some misdeed or other.

"It's a chance you'll have to take," I said. "I can't give you a guarantee. But go along with me until ten minutes before the *Ferret* sails. That will still give you time to take him off."

"All right," he said reluctantly. "I'll gamble with you. But it's highly irregular."

I met Harley at the local bastille and drove him to his ship. On the way he asked: "Did Ninette get away?"

"As far as I know. Did she give you the package for her sister?"

"No. I guess she'll give it to me in Marseilles," he said.

"Did she give you her sister's address?"

He shook his head. "I'll get that from her, too."

I went aboard with him to check if any packages had been delivered for him while he was in the lockup. None had.

I wished Harley good luck and went ashore to outline my

program for Emile Delorde. I wanted to make sure he had arranged for the French radio and television network to broadcast the news that Harley had been released and would sail with the *Ferret* at noon next day.

Delorde had the *Ferret* watched all night but the real stakeout didn't begin until sunrise. He must have had thirty or forty men on the waterfront, covering the Quai Lunel from the church of Nôtre Dame du Port at the north end of the harbor to the quarantine station at the beginning of the breakwater. They were ostensibly dockers, customs agents, a priest or two, a hawker of souvenirs, bicyclists, a few casual pedestrians, and a furtive seller of pornographic pictures.

The gray *Ferret* was still berthed behind the Corsican mail steamer, smoke pouring from her two funnels and the blue peter flying to announce her imminent sailing.

The Commissaire and I stood across the quay where we could watch the gangplank, although neither of us thought our suspect would appear in person. As the morning wore on, I began to doubt that he—or she—would show at all. And Delorde was insisting on the deadline of eleven-fifty. In fact, he was talking of moving it up to eleven-thirty.

At eleven-ten two of Delorde's men arrested Jojo le Dur in the Rue Segurane back of the customs house. They nabbed him in the act of giving a small boy five francs to deliver a package to the gangplank of the *Ferret*. The package was addressed to Jerome Harley, a machinist's mate second class, *U.S.S. Ferret*, to be delivered to a Mrs. Frank Franchi at a New York address. Inside the wrapping was a handsome two-pound box of Vogade's famous candied fruits from the French Riviera.

However, underneath a thin top layer of fruit slices were four cellophane bags of a crystalline white substance which on analysis proved to be pure heroin weighing just under a kilogram—about two pounds. In New York two pounds of heroin can sell for at least \$250,000—a quarter of a million dollars' worth of drugs packed in a confectionary box small enough to go inconspicuously into a Navy man's seabag.

Jojo le Dur, of course, denied that he was Georges Cantini and was terribly surprised that the Vogade box contained anything but candied fruits. He was just doing a favor for a girl he met in a café who wanted to send the box to a sister in America. Jojo was booked for

possession of narcotics and suspicion of murder. The New York address on the package was wired to Interpol in Paris for transmission to the U.S. Narcotics Bureau. And the investigation into the murder of Sergeant Fayot took a new tack.

Delorde and I had a late lunch at a place he said made the best *pistou* in Nice, a city in which *pistou* is considered the nonpareil of soups. We had a bottle of dawn-colored Tavel with our *brandade de morue* and some excellent Hermitage with the roast kid. During lunch I had to outline the steps of my ratiocination to convince Delorde that I did not have either ESP or, like most newspapermen, the half-finished manuscript of the great American novel in my trunk. I merely had had the advantage of seeing Ninette and the sailor together, of having her visit me alone, and of seeing Jojo and guessing his relationship with the girl.

The character of the girl was the key to the mystery. She had obviously become antisocial as a result of her early brush with the police and her imprisonment, perhaps undeserved. At any rate, her association with Jojo was natural enough, I thought, although it would be hard to believe there was any romantic attachment. When Jojo

had come to her in Tunisia, however, with a surefire scheme to introduce over a million francs' worth of heroin into America, promising her perhaps fifty or sixty thousand for her share, it would be hard to say no. All she had to do was get cozy with an American sailor. The customs people don't bother to look into a sailor's seabag.

The trouble was that the sailor Ninette had picked was the sort of man she had never known before—kind, considerate, gallant—and she had fallen for him. When she decided that she wanted to marry Harley and go to America for a fresh start, she determined not to involve the sailor in Jojo's scheme.

When I first saw her in the Commissaire's anteroom, she faced three threats to her newly envisioned future. One came from the police, personified by Sergeant Fayot. The second was Jojo, who would not easily give up his million-franc project. The third was myself—until she was satisfied that perhaps I was not from Interpol after all.

She thought she saw a way to kill two tough birds with one stone. She would placate Fayot and get Jojo out of her hair with the same maneuver. Evidently knowing that Jojo had a Riviera police record, she had asked Fayot to her room where Jojo would be waiting.

But Jojo was not going to let anything interfere with his million-franc project, certainly not the police. So he shot Fayot, dumped most of the candied fruits from the Vogade box, and forced Ninette at gun's point to accompany him in his escape.

"And having killed a man who might stop him from carrying out his export business," I concluded, "he certainly was going to put his merchandise in the hands of his unwitting courier. That's where you came in."

Delorde nodded and took out his pipe. "Too bad you don't have a degree from a French university," he said. "Otherwise you might have a future with the Police Judiciaire."

We learned next day that

Ninette never got to Marseilles to meet her sailor. The police found her lying behind a clump of aloes and cactus on Château Hill, overlooking the port. She had been shot in the head.

The ballistics men said she had been killed by the same gun that killed Fayot. It was hidden under the mattress of the hotel room Jojo had rented.

To close out my career as guardian pro tem of the welfare of the officers and men of the U.S. Navy, I sent a newspaper clipping about Ninette's murder to Harley in Marseilles. I didn't want him to believe his girl had stood him up deliberately.

When I look back, though, I sometimes think perhaps I should have let him believe that Ninette had escaped. Because in a way she did.



NEVER PUBLISHED BEFORE

R. L. Stevens

The Lot's Wife Caper

How about, for a change of pace, a real zany detective story? A detective story of the Absurd—or perhaps beyond the Absurd, according to your definition . . . So now meet Sidney Sparrow, a zookeeper no less, and his “Watsons,” a raven and an armadillo no less. (Raven? Shades of Edgar Allan Poe whirling in his grave!) . . .

Detective: SIDNEY SPARROW

I'd had a busy morning with the animals, and with a number of small errands around the city. I'd hauled feed for the antelope and a bucket of fish for the seals, and on the way back from the last trip I'd run into Norm O'Brian, the councilman, down near the Shady Dell Motel and stopped the truck to chat with him for a while.

That was why, when Mayor Smith phoned me at one that afternoon, I was still only half finished cleaning out the hippopotamus cage. “Did I take you away from anything?” he asked, and I knew right away he was not his usual cheerful self.

“I’m up to my neck in work,

but I’m never too busy to talk with you, Mayor.”

I call him Mayor because it only seems right, although everyone else in town calls him Lot. His first name is actually Lothar; he was named after some comicstrip character who appealed to his father. But he shortened the name to Lot when he entered politics, and of course the newspapers loved it.

Even his everyday activities are good for front-page photographs with trick captions like (the Mayor leaving his car) *Parking Lot*, or (the Mayor showing off his bulging middle-aged waistline) *Lots of Lot*. Everyone thinks they are awful-

ly funny, and everyone likes Lot Smith. They didn't mind when his campaign slogan became: *Vote for Smith—It Means a Lot to You!* And of course they've taken to calling his beautiful young wife Yolanda Lot's wife, though some say *she* doesn't see the humor in it.

"I need your help," Mayor Smith told me on the phone. "Can you come over now, Sidney? You know where I live."

"Certainly, sir. But could you tell me what it's about? Murder? Robbery? Arson?"

Mayor Smith sighed into the telephone. "Worse than any of those, I'm afraid, Sidney. My wife has been turned into a pillar of salt."

My name is Sidney Sparrow, and as you might have gathered I'm the zookeeper here in our little town. Since we only have about 25 animals that isn't much of a job, and it leaves me plenty of time to pursue my first love—detection. I specialize in crimes that baffle the police. The police have called on me several times in the past, in cases as diverse as the Greasy Fingers Caper and the Scentless Skunk Caper. I liked working with them when I could, even though they sometimes called me a sparrow cop because of my name. I realized it's a derogatory term for a police-

man who is out of favor with his superiors, but I didn't mind because they were a fine bunch of fellows. It's just that the Chief finally objected to Arnold and Rudy always being with me, and pretty soon he wouldn't let me into the station house any more.

Mayor Lot Smith lives on top of a hill, in one of our best neighborhoods. He was in the driveway when I pulled up in my truck, and he hurried over to greet me. "Sidney—I appreciate your coming right over! I'm beside myself—I don't know whether to call the police or a doctor or what!"

"A pillar of salt, you said on the phone."

"That's right! It's horrible, horrible! . . ."

Then I guess he must have noticed Arnold and Rudy because he let out a gasp. "That . . . creature! You still have it with you! And the bird!"

"Of course, Mayor. Arnold and Rudy are my mascots. Rudy the Raven has a wing span of 25 inches, and he talks. The creature, as you call him, is Arnold. He's an armadillo. He's a nine-banded armadillo, and he can roll himself into a ball inside his bony outer plates."

Unfortunately, as we were entering the side door of the

house and I was holding the screen door for the always slow Arnold, Rudy took off from my shoulder on a flight across the kitchen. His long wings brushed a few dishes and a tray on top of the refrigerator, and before I knew it the whole thing had toppled to the floor.

"Blast it, Sidney," the Mayor said, "how can you collect clues with these animals around all the time?"

"Oh, I don't go in much for clues, sir. My methods are psychological."

"I see," the Mayor murmured. He hurried on into the living room, and I followed. "There she is," he said.

I hadn't known exactly what to expect, but even his warning had not prepared me for what I saw. There, in an overstuffed chair facing the television set, rested a hundred-pound sack of rock salt.

"It's not exactly a pillar," I pointed out. "More like a sack."

"What difference does that make? She's been changed into a pillar of salt, just like Lot's wife in the Bible."

I bent closer to the sack. "You're sure it's Mrs. Smith?"

"Of course I'm sure! That's her pin."

And it was—a large diamond-and-pearl pin with the pearls spelling out the initials YES,

puncturing the sack at about chest level. Yolanda Elizabeth Smith had never been without that pin while she was alive. Some cynics even went so far as to imply that her main reason for marrying the Mayor was to acquire those initials. She had YES lettered on everything, from the familiar expensive pin to the little white sports car she drove.

"What was she watching on television?" I asked.

"The national political convention in St. Louis. A lot of our friends are there. She wanted to go, but I couldn't get away."

I grunted and glanced up at Rudy, who was perched on top of a bookcase. "Nevermore," he said.

"What was that?" the Mayor asked.

"Just Rudy saying *nevermore*. Ravens always say *nevermore*." I didn't explain that after trying to teach Rudy to talk for six months I'd finally given up and taken a course in simple ventriloquism instead. People expected the bird to say it, and I didn't feel it was really cheating if I helped him along.

"What about my wife? What about Yolanda?"

"Perhaps it's not really her," I ventured. "Perhaps someone kidnaped her and left the sack of salt in her place."

"But who? The Organization?"

The city had experienced a number of Mob-type killings in recent months, and Mayor Smith had been demanding police action. It was just possible that the Mob was behind this.

"Don't you worry, Mayor. Whoever did this, I'll get to the bottom of it."

Mayor Smith stared uncertainly at the sack of rock salt. "Do you think we should bury it?"

"Perhaps we should just move it out to the garage. Here, I'll give you a hand."

We each grabbed an end, and tugged the thing off the chair. "Careful, careful now," the Mayor cautioned. "We mustn't jar her!"

"Keep your end up, sir."

We deposited the sack gently on the garage floor. Mayor Smith was out of breath. "I hope you'll be able to do something, Sidney," he told me.

I was eyeing the diamond-and-pearl pin with the YES on it, Yolanda Smith's trademark. "May I borrow that pin for a few days, Mayor? And could you give me a list of your friends?"

"Certainly," he said. "But almost everyone's out of town at the convention. That's why I think it must be the Organization."

"Then I'll get right to work on it," I promised. Since I never bother to search for clues, there was nothing more to be gained at the Mayor's house. I put the pin in my pocket, gathered up Arnold and Rudy, and went back to the truck.

The Mob's headquarters is located in a shopping center near the airport. I parked my truck out front and went in to see the big boss. The character at the front desk eyed me with distaste and finally spoke into an intercom.

"That bird Sparrow is here to see you, Boss."

"Send him up," came the reply.

The head of the Mob in our town is Bill Adams, a middle-aged businessman who has risen fast in the ranks. He was brought into the Organization a few years ago when someone decided it wasn't good public relations for the Mob to limit its membership—not in the liberal atmosphere of today. Bill was a good man for them, a witty talker and a fast man with a gun.

"Well," he said, taking off his sunglasses to examine me. "It's my old friend and arch-rival, Sidney Sparrow! What can I do for you, Sidney?"

"The Mayor's wife got changed into a pillar of salt," I

said, getting right to the point. "What do you know about it?"

Adams eyed Rudy suspiciously as the raven banked and glided about the room. Finally he answered, "Not a thing, Sidney. Should I know anything?"

"The Mayor thinks she's dead. He thinks the Organization did it."

"My hands are clean," he said, holding them up. "Pillars of salt aren't in our line."

I showed him the YES pin she'd been wearing. "Recognize this?"

"Sure. Everyone knows that pin. It's worth a few thousand. We'd have taken it along if we did anything to her."

Arnold was next to the chair, gnawing at my feet. I slapped him on the shell and said, "What about those other recent killings, Adams? They were Organization jobs, and the Mayor was investigating them."

"Sometimes our business gets competitive," Adams answered with a shrug.

Rudy settled on the desk and croaked, "Nevermore."

"What'd he say?"

"Nothing. Just raven talk."

But Adams was eyeing the bird with open suspicion now. "Is he one of those birds who repeats what he hears?"

I shook my head. "Those are stool pigeons, not ravens."

"Still ..." And before I

knew what was happening, his hand had dropped to the desk drawer and come up fast holding a small automatic. "The only good raven is a dead raven."

I was terrified, helpless. I had no weapon, nothing with which to stop him. Rudy took flight again, but Adams followed him with the gun.

I had only an instant to act.

I rolled Arnold into a ball and hurled him with all my strength straight at the Mob chief's head.

"What happened?" he asked when he came to ten minutes later and saw me standing over him with the gun. "What in hell did you hit me with?"

"Arnold. He's a very effective weapon at close range. You're lucky he didn't fracture your skull."

Adams glared at Arnold and Rudy. "Call these damn things off me! I don't know anything about Lot's wife and any pillar of salt."

"Somehow I believe you," I told him. "You never would have pulled that gun if you were lying low. I'll be going now. But watch your step."

"Yeah," Adams answered, rising from the floor. "I'll do just that."

I drove back to the zoo for

the afternoon feeding and sat for a long time thinking about the case. It certainly was not without interest, but the problem was, I lacked suspects. Everybody was out of town. I didn't think Bill Adams was involved, but that left no one but the Mayor himself. Might he have killed his wife, and buried her in the garage or the garden? Somehow I couldn't quite believe it.

I went out to the elephant cage and sprayed Toby with the hose. He likes that, especially on hot days. Then I tossed a few fish to the seals, and all of a sudden everything fell into place. I remembered going for the fish that morning, and suddenly it all began to make sense.

I drove the truck back over to the Shady Dell Motel and asked the room clerk if there was anyone named Jones registered.

"Yes, sir. Room 7-B."

"Thanks."

"You can't take those animals up!" he yelled after me, but I ignored him.

I rapped on the door of 7-B, and after a time the door was opened by Norm O'Brian, the councilman. "Well, it's Sidney again! How are you, anyway?"

"I'm fine, Norm. Where is she?"

"Where's who?"

"The Mayor's wife. I know she's here with you."

Yolanda Smith came out of the bathroom then, wearing a robe that must have belonged to Norm O'Brian. She saw me looking at the embroidered NO on the chest. "I decided it was time to change my image," she explained.

"I figured that," I said, "when you left your YES pin on the sack of salt. You were starting a new life, and all I had to do was figure out where. I remembered meeting Norm over near here this morning. He was one of the few politicians left in town this week, and of course he had the right initials for a change of image."

"But how did you know we registered under the name Jones?" Norm asked.

I ran my hand over Rudy's feathers to keep him under control. "You could hardly register as Smith, because that's her name."

"I'm not going back," she said.

"Sure you are. You scared the wits out of Lot with that sack of salt. You owe him something." I had another thought. "Besides, Norm, the Mayor is pretty friendly with the Organization these days. When I tell him where she is, he'll probably send a few of the

gang over to collect her."

Norm O'Brian was not a fighter. At the mention of the Organization he seemed to collapse. "There's no defense against them."

"Not unless you've got a hard shell," I agreed.

The councilman was silent.

"All right," Yolanda said finally, "I'll go."

"Good. Get dressed."

I drove her back home in the truck, and we never told the Mayor where she'd been. He had me take the sack of rock salt back to the zoo with me, but I haven't decided what I'm going to do with it yet.

Maybe I'll just keep it as a memento of my triumph in the Lot's Wife Caper.



Anthony Gilbert

Point of No Return

Meet Vanessa Freeman, former college professor—"exquisitely made, fragile, elegant, like some beautiful enameled bird"; and Ursula Jordan—"the shaggy-dog kind of spinster"; and find out how Van and Ursie, two ladybirds, are threatened by the lowest of crimes, and deal with the most despicable of criminals ever to show their faces in the cracked mirror of human affairs . . .

When the telephone rang that evening, for a moment neither of us stirred. The instrument lives in the hall, and we answer it strictly by rote. After a minute Vanessa looked up from her exquisite petit point and said in that voice that would have launched more than a thousand ships, "Your turn, Ursie."

"Couldn't you, this once?" I suggested, though I knew it wasn't fair. "I have a problem." Whether to introduce a streak of blue into the rose and purple heraldic blossom in my tapestry frame. Vanessa waited another moment, then she laid her work aside.

"I can see you mean me to answer it," she said. "I wonder why."

As she reached the door I

murmured something vague about it probably being Caro, and at once a kind of delicate ice settled on the atmosphere—as it always does these days when that name is mentioned. It's my fault, I know, but I can't help it. I'll never forgive her, not so long as I live.

When the door had closed I moved over to the window seat. Any minute now the evening star would come piercing through the dusk. I didn't really believe it would be Caro on the line, but if by some thousand-to-one chance it was, it wouldn't be me she'd be calling.

Caro Wellsley, soon to be Caro Marshall, is Vanessa's niece, the daughter of a much older sister, now dead. We don't see much of Caro in the ordinary way. She made a

spectacular marriage when she was nineteen, carrying off Sir Miles Wellsley, a legal tycoon whose boast is that everything he touches turns to gold.

"Very uncomfortable," said Vanessa when she first heard. "I hope Caro knows what she's doing." Miles was twice Caro's age, and had pursued her ever since she was seventeen. After the marriage we saw her mostly in the society glossies, driving her Silver Cloud, or wearing a halter of pearls and a platinum mink. It was only when she was in trouble that she appeared in the flesh.

We were both teaching in the Midlands in those days—Van was a college professor and I was languages mistress at the local high school. I'd never wanted to teach—the stage would have been my choice; but I had a widowed mother and no capital and what St. Paul calls the gift of tongues, so teaching seemed the obvious solution. Until I met Vanessa Freeman at a party six years before, I'd had no prospects but trying to drum foreign languages into the minds of a succession of couldn't-care-less girls until I finally drew my pension.

But Vanessa changed all that. It still astounds me. She, who could have had anyone, to pick on me, who couldn't pro-

vide a greater contrast. She is exquisitely made, fragile, elegant, like some small beautiful enameled bird. I'd never be surprised to see her take off on wings. I'm the shaggy-dog kind of spinster, and I suppose it's fortunate for me that there's someone who likes shaggy dogs.

If you saw Vanessa and Caro together you might mistake them for mother and daughter. They both have that unforgettable air. It's more than just beauty, it's something that won't die even when beauty fades. But there the resemblance ends.

Caro was born believing the world owes her a luxurious living. Vanessa knows that anything you take must be paid for, and for all her delicate appearance she's the working partner. If the car breaks down I phone the garage, and if one of our electrical gadgets goes out of order I send for the repairman. But Vanessa flings up the hood, or goes to work with a screwdriver. I shouldn't care to be the Archangel on the Gate at the last day when Vanessa Freeman comes up for judgment. She won't give even him best.

The only person who has been able to defeat her—and I'm not sure defeat is the right word—is Caro. It happened that autumn more than two years

earlier when our Great Dream became the Great Illusion. The dream was something only Van could have visualized. Out of the blue, as it were, she inherited The Cottage, where we now live, and a slice, admittedly an economical slice, of capital, and we decided to take a chance, burn our boats, throw in the jobs of which we were both weary, and start on a life of independence.

"Not a private teaching establishment," Van insisted. "That won't be the shape of things to come. But with your languages and my qualifications we'll open a language school with a Travel Bureau on the side."

Our pupils would be girls who wanted to specialize in foreign languages, and we would arrange careful tours for small numbers of them, and we should be the directors. Luckily for me Vanessa had an itching foot—there was hardly a city in Europe where she wouldn't find herself at home. And it didn't have to stop at Europe. See the world and be paid for doing it, I gloated. Imagine—Egypt, where you walk in the golden light, and the wild thymy hills of Greece! Too good to be true, I said—and of course it was.

Everything was in readiness. We had got the premises, we were living in The Cottage, we

could commute by car each day. We hadn't actually signed the agreements, but everything was waiting—when down came Caro, like that ill-fated crow, black as a tar barrel, to toss not just a spanner but a bomb into the works.

When I came back from walking in the woods that afternoon and saw her car at the door—she was the only possessor of a Silver Cloud—we were ever likely to have visit us—I wondered what on earth she wanted. It never occurred to me it might be just a social call. Provincial schoolmarms were never Caro's cup of tea. As I opened the door Van called out, "Ursie, see if the kettle's boiling and bring the brandy. We've got trouble on our hands."

When I came in, carrying the Dom-Remy, Caro was hunched by the fire, like some small bird, plumage draggled, colors quenched—but never a sparrow or a wren; a hummingbird, say, still special, still unforgettable. She looked right through me—I was never anything but that oddball Ursula Jordan whom Vanessa had inexplicably collected.

I filled a glass with brandy and Vanessa put it in Caro's hand. The look Van turned on the girl was something I'd never seen before—full of pity and

tenderness, such as she had never turned on me. My own heart burned—but not for Caro.

"What's happened to Caro?" I said, trying to speak lightly.

And Van said, "She's being blackmailed."

Blackmail is something you find in books and films or read about in the newspapers, something that affects other people, never anything that touches your own life. And that Caro Wellsley, the pampered and indulged wife of a well-known and wealthy man, should be as open to such an indignity as any penny-plain sinner—somehow it seemed absurd.

"Who's blackmailing her?" I asked, when the silence had gone on for a long time.

And Caro spoke the name they'll find engraved on my heart when I die. "Ethel Ridgley."

The name had a sordid sound and the story was the mixture as before. Mrs. Ridgley—anyway, that's what she called herself—was owner or part proprietor of a sleazy kind of hotel, called The Penthouse, in a sleazy south-coast resort. And here for the past year the exquisite, the feted, the immensely publicized Lady Wellsley, had been meeting her lover.

The more you have the more you want, my mother used to

say. You might think that a rich husband, a four-and-a-half-thousand-pound car, mink and diamonds, and the sort of life you associate with princesses in fairy tales, to say nothing of a child (to do her justice I think Isobel was the only person Caro was capable of loving as much as she loved herself) would be enough for one woman; but no—"I had to have someone," Caro insisted. "You can't imagine what it's like living with Miles. It's always cold." She actually shivered, and that wasn't acting.

I never saw Rupert Brook in the flesh, though I did see a picture of him later. He was one of those romantic, unsatisfactory, rather lupine young men who seem to appeal to women. Not that I think he called out much maternal instinct in Caro; but he was young, younger than she, and, as subsequent events proved, was mad about her, and I mean that in a literal sense.

"It was the contrast with Miles that appealed to her," Vanessa explained later. "If all she wanted was worldly success and approval she had all that. But if nothing succeeds like success, nothing sickens like it, either."

Whatever Rupert Brook was, he certainly wasn't successful, except in his conquest of Caro.

If everything Miles touched turned to gold, whatever that young man laid his hand on turned to ashes. Yet I did believe Caro when she said that at first he transformed her world. "I'd forgotten what it was like to be a human being," she told Vanessa.

Perhaps they got careless or, more likely, after a time she began to tire. Anyhow, within twelve months, she was trying to break off the relationship. "I began to think that Miles suspected something," she told us. "Once I thought I was being followed; perhaps I was wrong, but I couldn't take the chance. If ever he had proof, Miles would have separated me from Isobel, and I couldn't risk losing her for a dozen Rupert Brooks."

I think she expected young Brook to come to heel at her bidding. He'd been dancing to her piping, but now the music was over, and she wanted out. And that's when the trouble began. Because he wouldn't take his dismissal easily.

I wondered once if he might be in the blackmail plot, but Caro shook her head. Nevertheless he began to be a serious threat. "He rang up Miles's house," she said. "I was on tenterhooks in case Miles or his secretary should anger." He wrote—they had arranged an

accommodation address for his letters (I saw Vanessa wince at that, Caro creeping down like any adulterous slut to collect her mail)—saying he would come to London unless she'd come to see him at least one more time. So in the end she promised to go.

"He was impossible, Vanessa. He wanted me to leave Miles and set up house with him. It was like trying to talk sense to a child. He hadn't a job, he was in debt at the hotel, and what were we to live on?"

It was characteristic of Miles that though his wife might appear to revel in luxury there was probably no time during her married life when she could have laid hands on £50 without her husband knowing. And he was as avid about the keeping of accounts as any suburban husband.

"He said if I didn't come to see him he'd kill himself," Caro went on. "How was I to know he *meant* it? Don't they say the ones who always threaten to make a hole in the water never do?"

Only that was just what Brook had done—not a hole in the water, but a massive dose of sleeping pills. Where did he get them, Vanessa wanted to know; but Caro said you could always get that sort of thing if you knew your way around. His

landlady—this same Ethel Ridgley—found him when she took up his breakfast, and she was hours too late to be able to help. She phoned the doctor, the doctor called the police. The cause of death was obvious, the motive scarcely less so. A young man in poor circumstances, no job, no friends—it was a story you could read in the paper any day of the week.

Mrs. Ridgley said he hadn't left a note, perhaps he hadn't realized what he was doing. Naturally she'd say that, Caro agreed; it doesn't do even her kind of hotel any good to have the publicity of suicide. Still, "suicide while the balance of his mind was disturbed" was the verdict. It was a pinchpenny funeral—he seemed to have no one but a married sister up north, and she couldn't get away.

"I didn't even know about it," Caro said. "It wouldn't make the London press and I didn't see the local paper. I did think it was too good to be true that he wouldn't make any more trouble. And then this Ethel Ridgley came to the surface."

True to type, and to our experience with her later, Ethel Ridgley never put anything in writing. She telephoned Caro's London address, identified herself, and said she had a docu-

ment she would like to discuss. She had given evidence at the inquest that the dead man had left no message, no letter of any kind, but it turned out not to be true. On the contrary, he had left the sort of letter that would delight the heart of any Sunday tabloid editor, leaving no doubt at all in the reader's mind as to the identity of the woman concerned.

"And she's blackmailing you on that?" I cried. "But surely you can see she's burned her boats by telling the police that no letter existed? How can she come forward now?"

"Quite easily," Vanessa said. "She can say she found the letter later—behind a dressing table. Only I don't think she has the police in mind."

"Of course she hasn't the police in mind," Caro said. "She's giving me first refusal, and if I won't—or can't—pay her price, she'll take it to Miles."

"Does she suppose he'd submit to blackmail?"

"She knows he won't have to. Vanessa, he must never see that letter! Rupert used to write to me, and I destroyed his letters as soon as I'd read them. I never wrote to him, it was too dangerous. If Miles should get this letter he'd take Isobel away from me forever and I don't care what people say about the

law giving the child to the mother, he'd override it. And if he does that I'll kill myself, I swear I will!"

"What's she asking for the letter?" I inquired.

And Caro told us, "Two thousand pounds."

"Where does that niece of yours imagine we can raise two thousand pounds?" I demanded of Vanessa when Caro, reassured and now once more as cool as silk, had driven away. "Simple to say not to worry, it'll be all right, but surely she knows every penny of our savings and every penny of your legacy are tied up in this new venture."

"Fortunately the ends aren't quite tied," Vanessa said.

I didn't believe it at first—that she would pitch our future over her shoulder as though it were no more than a pinch of salt; but to her it wasn't even a problem. She didn't go through the motions of consulting me, of explaining or pleading; it was as natural a solution to her as her next breath.

"You can't do it," I protested. "We can't go back to those slave jobs."

"It's Caro's life—literally, her life. For us it's no more than a change of plan."

Even then I cherished a hope that we could call Ethel

Ridgley's bluff. She'd take a tithe of her demand, we could still cling to our enterprise—but not after I saw her. She was a shabby little peacock of a woman, so much in command of the situation she didn't even have to preen her moth-eaten plumage. I saw my proud Vanessa accept her conditions without protest—and if a bomb had fallen and destroyed us all I'd have had no regrets.

"I suppose you know you haven't only given away our present, you've mortgaged our future," I cried bitterly when the woman had taken herself off.

"Sufficient unto the day," murmured Vanessa, she who was the sworn enemy of clichés. It showed how far she had fallen. As for Caro, she didn't appear to think there was anything generous about the gesture. "I knew I could count on you," she told Vanessa. She was back safe in her kingdom, and what was it to her who was without?

I was right about the future, though. About a year later Miles was killed in a car crash, and in his will he had left an immense fortune tied up for his daughter, while Caro could only enjoy the interest; so my first frantic hopes of a repayment were dashed at birth. He also added a very curious codicil

which would virtually make Isobel a ward of court if it could be shown that Caro had behaved in a manner that made her an unsuitable guardian for the girl. And that was Ethel's second opportunity.

She appeared as punctually as the morning tea in a well-run household. She had found in one of the street-photographer booths at Marlston a casual snapshot taken the previous year; it showed Caro in the company of a strange dark young man, with a Valentino profile. It must have been snapped in the street, but even a spinster withering on the virgin thorn, which was doubtless how Caro thought of me, could have seen they were lovers.

The production of this photograph in the right quarter could do a lot of harm, she pointed out blandly, adding in a casual manner that she was compelled to make use of this opportunity because of debts her hotel had incurred. The previous summer had been a bad season, there were extensive accounts to be met. This time the demand was smaller, but it involved a mortgage on The Cottage, where we were still living.

We hadn't gone back to teaching—some puritan streak in Vanessa made her decree that women who allowed themselves

to compromise with a black-mailer weren't fit to supervise the education of the young. I thought a lot of the young could have given us lessons in compromise and put rings around us. We weren't exactly penniless. Vanessa did freelance work, I taught three days a week in someone else's language school that was a travesty of the one we had planned, and gave lessons by correspondence. And we lived like two ladybirds in an isolation as immense as the Gobi Desert.

"We don't *have* to pay," I insisted, but I knew we would. At least this time I wouldn't allow Van to become personally involved. We got the money together in bundles of old banknotes, packed them into a lingerie box, and I met Ethel in the lounge of the Paddington Court Hotel. This was like every railway hotel lounge—hosts of small tables occupied by women who looked as if they had been there for a year and would still be there in the same places if one arrived twelve months later; lost anonymous women for the most part, waiting for trains that never arrived and passengers who had never set out on their journeys.

Ethel came in, the same faded scornful woman she had been at our last meeting. When she walked out, with that ab-

surd parcel swinging on her arm, she said, "I won't say goodbye, Miss Jordan. I have a feeling we may meet again."

Out of the room she flounced and onto the station platform. I sat sick and blind with fury and watched her go.

Ten minutes later she was dead—had slipped and fallen in the afternoon commuter crowd, they said, and no one quite certain how it had happened. The mysterious thing was that the parcel containing the money was never found.

Behind me in the quiet room a door opened and closed as Vanessa slipped back to her place at the fireside. I waited a minute for her to tell me her caller's name, but she said nothing.

"That was a long call," I suggested, when I couldn't stand the silence any longer. "Was it Caro, after all?" Because Caro had fallen on her feet once more. Everyone had expected her to remarry, and she had confided to us that she was shortly going to announce her engagement to Charles Marshall, another tycoon, but of a very different stamp from her first husband. "This time it's love," Vanessa had said. As if that made everything worthwhile. "Not a word till Charles is back from his mission," Caro

had warned us. "But I had to tell you."

"No," said Vanessa now in reply to my question. "It wasn't Caro. That was Ethel Ridgley on the line."

I turned sharply. "Think what you're saying," I implored her. She was sitting beside the fire like a little Chinese goddess veiled in thorns. "How could it be Ethel? Unless you're going to tell me someone else was buried in her stead a year ago."

But that wasn't possible. I'd seen the woman myself, lying between the rails, with the crowd milling, and the authorities holding the people back, and the ambulance bell sounding from the frosty street. Someone had covered her, and questions were being asked and answered all around. "Don't ask me," I had said to someone shoving up against me and babbling with inhuman excitement. "I came down to get my train and I saw the crowd . . ."

"Oh, no, she was buried all right," Vanessa agreed, "and of course it wasn't actually Ethel on the telephone. But some people are like the phoenix, that mythical bird that rises from its own ashes. It doesn't always have to assume the identical shape."

"What shape is it assuming today?" I asked.

"A man calling himself Jack-

son, who says he's her brother, and has something he thinks might interest us. Did she ever speak of a brother, Ursula?"

"She never spoke of anyone," I said. "She might have been Topsy who just grewed."

I had been convinced from that first occasion that blackmail was no new game to her—she knew all the rules. Everything had been conducted personally, over the telephone or face to face. We had no signature, no correspondence, no postmarked envelope, nothing. She could have declared complete ignorance and we couldn't have disproved her.

"He says he was in Canada at the time of her death, and as he was next of kin the information was sent to the last address they found in her book for him. He'd left by then, and it took months for the news to catch up with him." Even then he hadn't come straight home. "He says he couldn't afford the fare," Vanessa explained.

Her voice sounded like the voice of a dead person rising from the tomb. On impulse I leaned forward and switched on her reading lamp. During the few minutes that had elapsed since the phone began to ring and her return to the room, she had changed more than during the past twelve months. It wasn't so much a pinching of

features—she could never be anything less than beautiful; but something was missing. Hitherto she might have been disappointed of her hope, but the hope wasn't dead. Now it was as if some essential faith in the integrity of a justice she couldn't explain or even comprehend had died. She looked less outraged than betrayed.

"And is it his idea that we shall pay his fare back to Canada?" I laid my hand on hers, which was as cold as snow.

"Oh, I think he'll want more than that," she told me. "But you'll be able to ask him when he comes. He's due in about thirty minutes; he only telephoned to make certain we should be here."

"I warned you," I told her, turning back to the window. At some moment unnoticed, while we were waiting, the evening star had risen. I thought of a world where people lay down in innocence and rose in hope. I wondered if we'd ever find ourselves in that world again.

"What is it this time? Another photograph?"

"A diary, found among Ethel's papers and put aside for the next of kin, if one ever turned up. He's bringing it with him."

When the front doorbell rang Vanessa wouldn't let me admit the man alone.

"We'll go together," she said. "Union is strength."

The hall floated in shadow, but as I drew back the latch Van pressed the button of the chandelier and we were immersed in a silver flood. When one thinks of blackmailers, one imagines shabby little men with ragged mustaches, and wearing belted raincoats; but there was nothing shabby or apologetic or even openly threatening about our visitor. He blinked for an instant in the unexpected brilliance, then came charging past me, as though I wasn't even there, and went up to Vanessa.

"I hope I haven't spoiled your evening," he said, offering a hand she preferred not to notice. "But you know the old saying, If 'twere done 'twere well 'twere done quickly."

"That referred to a murder," said Vanessa, cool as a snowflake. He seemed momentarily abashed.

"Well, we must hope it doesn't come to that," he observed, trying to carry off the situation with a laugh, and following her into our living room as to the manner born. He stood in the center of the floor, making himself perfectly at home, putting a price on everything. He was a tall man, dark-haired, his eyes almost completely black, with a mobile unscrupulous face, an easy man-

ner, and (no doubt) a black heart concealed by a surprisingly well-cut suit.

"Is that your niece?" he asked, walking over and picking up a photograph of Caro taken some years before, and showing a gay laughing girl with a riband holding back her dark hair. "I quite see you'd take a lot of chances to keep her looking that way. What was she—deb of the year?" Easily he put the picture back. I turned away abruptly and drew the curtain. "I don't like being watched," I explained. Even if it was only a star.

"Should I introduce you?" Vanessa murmured. "My friend, Miss Ursula Jordan."

He turned and bowed. "U.J.?" he said. "Oh, it's all in the diary my sister left behind—a kind of insurance, I suppose, in case of an emergency."

"We had no notion your sister had literary qualities," Vanessa observed. I recognized that tone. I knew she was going to make things as difficult as possible for us all, and it would be a hollow victory at best, since I knew Jackson held all the aces in the deck and probably had a fifth up his sleeve.

"It was no bad idea," he now said. "Like leaving a message saying where you can be found."

"I expect you did the same

tonight," Vanessa said. "Your wife—"

"No woman's put my head in the noose yet," he assured her. "And, as I told you, I'm only passing through."

"Unfortunately it doesn't seem to have helped Mrs. Ridgley," Vanessa went on. "I mean, she left the diary, but she still came to grief."

He shrugged ever so faintly. "You can't win 'em all," he said. "Now among her papers was this diary and it makes very interesting reading. And not just to me. It goes back a long way, right back to the suicide of that young fellow at The Penthouse. I can't help thinking it's a story that would prove very popular to a lot of people who have to get their thrills at second-hand."

"Through the press, no doubt," agreed Vanessa. "I think I get your meaning, Mr. Jackson. You're prepared to reduce the number of readers to two—for an adequate fee, of course."

"She knows all the answers, doesn't she?" Jackson turned to me with something approximating a wink, but I wouldn't meet his eye. "The one I had particularly in mind was Mr. Charles Marshall. I understand your niece's engagement is shortly to be announced—"

"It was clever of you to

discover that," Vanessa congratulated him. "It's supposed to be secret."

He made the gesture of twirling a buoyant mustache. "Oh, I do my homework," he boasted. "You should approve, Miss Freeman. Didn't you find that your pupils who were prepared for all emergencies were the ones who came out at the top of the list—in your school-marming days, I mean?"

"They were still subject to viruses and runaway buses," Van told him smoothly.

"I'll lay it straight on the line, shall I?" He took a flat black book with *Diary* in gilt letters printed on the cover and put it on the table beside her. "Help yourself," he offered. "Only—no tricks, mind. I'm wondering what Mr. Marshall's reaction would be—he's an ambitious chap, I understand, and on the way up, the lucky devil—if the idea got around that he was—well, buying damaged goods."

Vanessa has one of those exquisite creamy faces that never get unbecomingly red, but her complexion changed now; she still didn't go scarlet, as I should have done, but her face assumed a corpse-like pallor. She turned abruptly toward the fire, picking up the little steel poker we keep in the hearth.

"Don't do it," warned our visitor. "You'd never get away with it."

Vanessa looked at the poker as if she didn't recognize it or know what it was doing in her hand. Then she threw it down.

"I've always been given to understand that murder is simple," she agreed. "It's the aftermath—for instance, how on earth should I explain your presence in my house?"

It was Jackson's first sign of discomfiture. They were talking only to each other. I took up more space than either, but I might have been less than a shadow. It brought back to my mind the day when Van and Caro had sat there and disposed of my future as if it were no more than a strip of discarded orange peel. In my odd way I was glad to be reminded. Vanessa put out a languid hand and picked up the diary.

"I hope I don't underestimate you, Mr. Jackson," she said. "But it interests me to know how you, a man newly returned from Canada, could so easily identify Miss Jordan and myself from mere initials."

"Ah, but the right initials. And the dates fit, too. In any case, both of your names appear in full at the start, and it wasn't at all difficult to trace you. You both stand out in a place like this."

Vanessa put up her hand. "Please spare us that, at least," she said. "Let us understand one another, as well as we may. Assuming we are unable or unwilling to meet your terms, am I right in supposing you don't propose to show this—document—to the police? Well, of course not. There'd be no financial advantage to you in that, would there?"

I thought it was time I took a hand. "Oh, Van, why spin it out?" I pleaded. "That's her writing all right. And the less publicity the better. Besides," I wound up in sudden bitterness, "you know that in the last crux you'll pay the price as you've paid it before. The future—the house—what comes next?"

All I wanted now was to get the thing settled and hear Jackson drive away. I was like the fictitious soldier at Agincourt, who had no stomach for the fight. Vanessa was casually leafing through the diary.

"It's too bad your sister didn't have second sight," she observed. "She might have been able to tell you how she managed to slip that day at the critical moment."

"I've wondered about that, too," Jackson agreed. "Life isn't always that obliging. You didn't actually see her fall, did you?" He turned unexpectedly

"It was all over when I got there," I replied. "Just this crowd and the authorities trying to hold everybody back, and everyone talking and shoving—it was horrible."

"Life at second-hand," said Jackson seriously. "Oh, well, I expect if questions were asked, someone would remember your being in the hotel lounge."

This was danger, undisguised, from an unexpected quarter; but once again Van saved the day.

"Let us confine ourselves to such facts as we do possess," she suggested. "I will start by admitting that I should be very much happier to see this diary destroyed. I think, Mr. Jackson, the ball is now in your court. If you will serve, please."

"Meaning how much?" He named a figure. I had realized he was going to pitch it high, but this made Ethel's original demand seem like pennies. Even Vanessa looked dumbfounded.

"You're not joking, I take it?"

He rubbed his thumb and forefinger together, in a suggestive, vulgar feature. "Never joke about serious subjects," he said. "And what can be more serious than money?"

"And if we find ourselves unable to cope?"

"You find money in the oddest places. I believe Mr. Mar-

shall isn't exactly a pauper."

"You'd get short shrift from him," Vanessa warned.

"Or there's a fellow I know on the *Sunday Recorder*. This would be right up their street."

"Even disreputable tabloids like the *Recorder* have their limits," Vanessa suggested.

"You could be right, but you'd need a telescope to spot 'em. Besides, more things are done by innuendo..."

Vanessa threw the diary down as though it were something too corrupt to be handled any longer.

"I appreciate the situation," she said. "Naturally, I shall require some time to consider. I don't ask if I can rely on you not to offer this in any other market until you have our reply, because clearly this so-called evidence couldn't fetch anything like your figure from any other source. Miss Jordan and I—"

He grinned. "You sound like the British Prime Minister, but don't overplay your hand, Miss Freeman. If you think you can stall me till the announcement of the engagement is made, forget it. Let's see. Today's Tuesday. I'll be round again on Friday to collect. Friday's a good night to contact my friend at the *Recorder*—catch the Sunday public, you see—and no nonsense about checks, please."

I'm not a legal beagle myself," he added coolly, "but isn't there some kind of penalty for paying a blackmailer to suppress evidence—sort of perjury in reverse?"

"I told you this would happen," I said fiercely. "We burned our boats when we agreed to Ethel Ridgley's first demand."

"Then we must learn to swim even in rough water," Vanessa said quietly. "How good a swimmer are you, Mr. Jackson?"

"You ask my Mum, she'd tell you I was born swimming." He grinned.

I saw, if Jackson didn't, that Van was almost at the end of her tether. "You've had a shock," I said. "I'll get a drop of brandy."

She pushed herself to her feet. "I'll get it," she said. "I daresay we could all do with a drop."

"Under safeguards," Jackson agreed, and he sent me that conspiratorial glance again. He moved forward to open the door, and on an impulse I laid a hand on his arm. He couldn't have looked more surprised if a serpent had fastened onto his wrist. "You don't mind taking chances, do you?" I said, as the door closed behind Vanessa. "If she had used that poker I'd have sworn it was suicide, and I

know which of us would have been believed."

"Don't push your luck," he said harshly. We talked for two or three minutes while he swaggered about examining Vanessa's treasures. "She's a long time, isn't she?" he suggested. "What's she doing? Doctoring the brandy?"

"She wouldn't insult Dom-Remy like that," I said. "She's probably trying to restore the *status quo*. I suppose it's second nature to you to hurl bombs into strangers' backyards—"

"She's as tough as an old boot," said Jackson in scornful tones. "All that fragile air—I bet the Roman matrons looked like her, having a fine time watching the Christian maidens being gored by wild cows. Ever been to the Chamber of Horrors? You'd be surprised at the homely little women, the sort that ask you in for a cuppa, who crushed unwanted kids to death between mattresses or put poison in the old man's nightly cocoa, and never lost a minute's sleep. I can't think how Ethel had the nerve to stand up to her."

The door opened and Vanessa came back, carrying the decanter and three balloon glasses on a silver tray. "I hope I haven't delayed you," she said formally. "I was waiting for the glasses to warm."

"I thought the brandy did that," grinned Jackson.

"The warmth brings out the full bouquet." She picked up the decanter, but he jumped in and took it from her. "Allow me!" He poured the first tot and handed it to her. She drank it deliberately and handed the glass back. "A test case? You give me credit for very little finesse, Mr. Jackson. Please help yourself."

I was convinced this wasn't Van's first glass, and I wished she would let Jackson go away. Then a sound from beyond the window made me start. "Why, it's raining," I exclaimed.

"Yes. Didn't you know? I am afraid you'll have a wet drive home, Mr. Jackson. Still, your car looks as though it could stand up to a storm."

"She gets me from A to B," Jackson agreed. "You don't mind?" He refilled his glass. "Shouldn't we be drinking a toast?" he suggested.

I burst into sudden laughter. "When shall we three meet again?"

"Friday," he agreed. So we all drank to Friday.

When she came back from seeing him off, Van lay back in her chair like someone dead. Her look frightened me. I had to say something. "So he's gone," I observed idiotically.

"He's gone," Van agreed.

"Till Friday," I amended.

"He's gone. Period."

I turned my head sharply. "What's that supposed to mean? You can't imagine he won't be back."

"He won't be back." Her voice was drained but somehow convincing.

"How can you—did you get hold of the diary then?"

"The diary was never of any importance, just an excuse to get inside the door. People are such amateurs, Ursula. It's like these mass-produced clothes where all the buttons fall off the first time you put them on. Here he comes with his story of just being home from Canada, but he has a dear friend on a Sunday paper. He tells us that Ethel kept his diary in case of an emergency, but there *was* an emergency and the diary never turned up. Even if the police hadn't shown interest, the sort of spiders who live in shady hotels like The Penthouse would never have sealed it up unread. No, it was never produced at the inquest or anywhere else, because at that time it didn't exist."

"You're full of surprises," I congratulated her, when I got my voice back. "Do you suggest he wrote it?"

"I don't know," Vanessa acknowledged, "but I am sure

that Ethel Ridgley didn't. Why keep a diary solely for our benefit? What about her other victims? We weren't the first, you know; her behavior throughout bears the stamp of professionalism—she was almost the only professional in the picture," she added under her breath. "Naturally, I didn't recognize the handwriting—but I wonder what made you so sure it was hers? We'd just agreed she'd never put down a word in writing, not so much as her signature. You had me puzzled there, Ursie, but I didn't want to cramp your style, not with your friend present."

"Not my friend," I protested, stung.

"Perhaps 'friend' isn't the correct word. Still, you'll not deny it was due to you that he came here this afternoon. Refill my glass," she added quickly, "and have another tot yourself. We're both going to need it. There comes a point of no return in every situation, what's sometimes called the moment of truth, and I think we're there now. I think, too, you owe me that, and you needn't be afraid of Jackson's vengeance—*because he won't be coming back.*"

I didn't recognize my hand holding the decanter, refilling the glasses. It seemed to have a life, a volition, of its own.

"What did you do?" I said.

"I simply advised him to go back by the inland road. I know the coast road is quicker, and by going inland you're apt to get caught in the Lamberwell bottleneck, but it's safer in bad weather. But drivers and brakes both need to be as steady as rocks, particularly on a dark night with the rain falling, and he doesn't know the neighborhood. Of course, I warned him about Dead Man's Morrice."

That was the astounding name of a burnt-out pub standing on the cliff edge, round which various superstitions had accumulated.

"Even you, even I," Van went on, "who know the place like the back of our hands, exercise particular care on that turn. The road suddenly becomes a precipice—"

"Perhaps Mr. Jackson will exercise particular care, too."

But Van only said, "It won't help him. His brakes won't hold."

I knew then why she had been so long fetching the brandy. I could see in my mind's eye those small clever hands, of hers working like lightning under the hood, the swift fatal adjustment, the pitiless eyes.

"You should have been the actress," I cried. "Van, it's murder!"

"I warned him to go the other way," she said seriously. I could imagine. The soft, faintly scornful tone, the flashing eye, the cool appraisal of our visitor as someone already slightly out of control—oh, the man wasn't living who wouldn't have defied her then.

"We haven't long to wait," she continued. "Did you see his car? A big showy article as meretricious as himself. But never mind about him, he's not important any more. Tell me why you did it, Ursie—after all these years? Betray me, I mean? And with a creature like that?"

You must have read the phrase about the heavens opening, thunder pealing forth, lightning flashing like gold swords, angels and archangels deafening and blinding the human host. It was like that with me.

"I said you didn't need that last glass of brandy," an unfamiliar voice said—my voice.

"I suppose you cooked it up between you," Van went on relentlessly. "You telephone, you said to him, and I'll see to it she answers. And then when he arrived he never even hesitated—he knew at once which of us *wasn't* Miss Freeman. Besides, Caro's engagement. Someone had to tell him—and it wasn't me. You were in his power, weren't you, Ursie? Oh,

yes, I could see that, he was exhibiting you like—oh, like someone's prize vegetable marrow. I suppose the fact is he was there that afternoon when you pushed Ethel onto the line."

By now I'd hardly have been surprised if the door had opened and Ethel herself came walking in, all green and moldy from the tomb.

"I wasn't even on the platform," I reminded her.

"That's what you said. But it can't be true. Because there were police there holding back the crowd and you couldn't have got near enough to the edge to see her—she was between the rails, remember, and at first she was reported as an unidentified woman—but you knew who it was. You came back to tell me—and how could you know unless you had been there? Was that in your mind all the time—killing her? Or did she say something that signed her own death warrant? Had you agreed to share the two thousand pounds? I've wondered so often. Come, Ursula, the point of no return. You're quite safe. I'm the one person in the world who could never betray you."

Inside me something boiled up and burst; the room was full of streaks of colored light as vivid as blood. I heard my own voice shouting.

"You say that?" I yelled. "You, the archbetrayer? Do you know what you meant to me all those years? Meeting you at that party was like my being born again. All that treadmill existence of school, school, school, and then back to my mother, and after she died back to nothing, and suddenly you, giving me life, leading me out of the fog into a sun I thought could never be extinguished. I would have died for you any time during those five years we shared, before you let me see how little I meant, less than Caro, a stupid brainless little bitch who couldn't even settle her own bills. I didn't understand then what you saw in me from the very first day—"

And Vanessa said simply, "I saw a friend."

"A victim," I flashed back. "I suppose it was inevitable. If you'd even consulted me, let me be your partner in that crisis—but, no, you just took my future and threw it to Caro as you'd throw a bone to a dog."

Vanessa looked astounded. "There was never any choice. Caro was my family."

"I thought I was that, the one that sticketh closer than a brother."

"You were my second self," Van told me steadily. "I could never have said that of Caro."

"And so," I plowed on, not daring to meet those eyes, refusing to be lured by that steadfast gentle voice, "I hated you—kowtowing to Ethel Ridgley, involving me in your humiliation. I hated you in inverse ratio to the love, the worship almost, I'd had for you. You should suffer—" My voice was hot like the breath of serpents. "I should watch you writhe, for once I'd hold the cards. Only—you won again, when I realized I wasn't getting any pleasure out of it. I could cut my own heart out, but I didn't break yours, did I?"

"Broken hearts are no more use than broken china. You just throw them away. Was I right about Jackson, Ursie?"

"Are you ever wrong?" I almost screamed. "I thought I had the upper hand, Jackson thought he had, but you've defeated us both. Oh, clever, clever Miss Freeman! I couldn't even defeat Ethel. I'll never forget her mincing away out of the lounge—I won't say goodbye, Miss Jordán, just *au revoir*, I feel we may be very useful to each other in the future, you and I." Even Miss Vanessa Freeman may turn out to be less upstage, *n'est-ce pas?*"

"And that's when you decided to kill her? Oh, Ursie, do you never stop to think? All those eyes, didn't it occur to

you that *someone* would see? Where did Jackson come in?"

I remembered sitting in my comfortable empty compartment fifteen minutes later. People were still milling on the platform, questions were still being asked. I hadn't been stopped—no one, I thought, had noticed me. I'd even managed to recover the parcel that looked like lingerie and actually contained £2000.

And then the door had slid back and there he was, dropping into the corner opposite me and saying, "Do you mind if I smoke?"—though it was a nonsmoker and without even waiting for my reply continuing, "What made you do it? Was she blackmailing you? And what exactly was in that parcel you carried away?"

"If I'd been the topmost actress of the season I couldn't have carried that one off," I cried. "No cue, no hint. I did what I could. 'I'll pull the communication cord,' I said, and he laughed. 'You do just that,' he told me. 'Of course, I'd have to tell them what I saw, and they'd want to examine the parcel—but if you've nothing to fear, why, go right ahead.' I almost died."

"Poor Ursie!" said Vanessa, and now there was no mockery in her voice, only compassion. "I think that's what appealed to

me about you that first day. You had such qualities, you cared, but you were such a muddler. Did you never wonder why the best jobs always escaped you? You had the qualifications—but you're a muddler. I'm a natural resolver, I wanted to set you right. And then I found I wanted you the way you were, muddles and all. And I do still."

It was beyond belief. We needs must love the highest when we see it, the faithful heart, love's disciple—but did even his mother love Judas Iscariot? It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of a goddess. I was in Vanessa's hands and there was no escape...

It was a man searching for mussels who found the crashed car and reported it to the police. They didn't find the driver for another two days and by that time his own father might have had doubts as to his identity. It had been a wild night and the rocks round that part of the coast are without pity.

We met the Rector's wife in the village just after the news broke. She is a little brown wren of a woman, as full of romantic fancies (in spite of her dreary husband) as an egg is supposedly full of meat.

"Another case of don't drink and drive, I suppose," she told

us, sighing briskly. "It's what everyone will say, and no one will ever know if he deserves a much more exotic epitaph."

"Exotic?" said Vanessa.

"He could have driven off the cliff edge in the pangs of unrequited love, or be the victim of a revengeful cuckolded husband, like that film at the Odeon that Arthur wouldn't sit through. It's not often we have a mystery round here, and no one seems especially interested. I mean, what was he doing in this neighborhood at all? Never tell me he came just for the ride. Ah, well!" Conversations with Mrs. Hughes usually ended this way. "I've got forty women coming to a Bible tea. And, as Arthur insists on saying, the music goes round and round."

"I never quite know what that means," Vanessa confessed, as the Rector's wife got on her bicycle and left.

"That life never stops, not even for tea," I suggested, "and you have to go along with it."

"It's too bad we couldn't have confided in her; I don't think she would have given us away." Vanessa sounded almost as though she meant what she said. "And life with the Reverend Hughes can't be a fireball. Still, this is one of the situations where silence is golden, and we all know how important the gold standard is . . ."

It was a lovely afternoon after two days of storm. Van and I came home through the woods and round the lake where the bluebells were struggling up from their drenched beds. Next month you wouldn't be able to set your foot down without trampling them into the earth. We had the place more or less to ourselves; everyone else was out on the cliff road. "Tourists!" said Vanessa, scornfully.

The telephone was ringing on our return. "Your turn, Ursie," Van said, walking to the drawing room.

I lifted the receiver. "Would that be Miss Freeman?" I didn't know the voice from Adam's.

"Who wants her?" I said.

"Oh, she wouldn't know my name, and it's not really important, is it? Shall we say Smith? I'm a friend of that fellow Jackson—his confidant, you might say. Told me everything, he did. A shocking thing, what happened to him. Such a jovial type to come to such a sticky—well, watery—end. Droll, too. I've got things to say to a dame called Freeman, and if I shouldn't be seen around during the next few days you can send the police dogs to dig in her garden."

"Very droll," I agreed.

"Why I rang—what I mean is, do you think I should tell the

police? It might be a good idea to have a meeting with Miss Freeman. I could be along this evening, if that's convenient, and perhaps we could come to some sort of an agreement." And the line went dead.

How odd, I thought, that for once Peggy Hughes should have the last word. "The music goes round and round."

"Who was it?" Van called cosily from the drawing room. So I went in and told her ...



C. B. Gilford

The Grisly Game

Certain story themes are irresistible—and foolproof. They can't miss, and suspense is built-in . . . In this story Mr. Gilford has combined three sure-fire elements—a love triangle, a circus background, and Russian roulette. They add up to an unputdownable thriller . . .

Alexis sighed, wiped his hands on his apron, and glanced at the wall clock. Four A.M. Outside, the Schoenstrasse was quiet. The automobiles were gone. Even the taxis. The city had retired to its beds. Here, in Alexis' bar, it was nearly as still. Only three customers remained, and he had tried to encourage their departure by turning out most of the lights. Bottles and glasses gleamed on their shelves like cats' eyes. The little tables, covered with their neat red-and-white cloths, huddled in the room like small misshapen ghosts.

Alexis was weary. The weariness began in his corn-plastered old feet, came up through his legs, and saturated his whole body. But dutifully he took yet another bottle of wine from the shelf, inserted a corkscrew, twisted, and drew

out the cork. Then, carrying the bottle, he shuffled round the end of the bar and over to the corner table.

"Please now," he said to his trio of customers there, "you drink this and you go home, eh?"

Only the girl looked up. A mere glance, her green eyes feverishly bright. But there was a tiredness in her, too. In the very brightness of her eyes, in the tiny lines around them, and at the corners of her red mouth, even redder from so many hours of sipping wine.

Alexis decided to appeal to her. "Fraulein," he said, "you have done two shows today. And you must do two more tomorrow. Today—today is Sunday, you know."

She smiled, with a smile that just barely altered the perfect lines of her lips. "We will do the two Sunday shows," she as-

sured him. "And they will be better than ever before."

Alexis shook his head. A week ago, when the Hofenstein Circus first arrived in the city, he had seen their acts, holding his breath, a knot of apprehension in his stomach, perspiration on his brow and on the palms of his hands.

He had watched Lori Anders especially. He would have watched her had she merely stood still and posed. Dressed in the briefest of costumes, low-cut bodice and tiny flaring tutu, she was a marvelous feminine creature, her arms and shoulders bare and golden, her legs long and slim and lithe and exquisitely shaped.

And her act—ah, that was something! A pair of magnificent white horses, manes flying, galloping in a tight circle inside the ring. Lori Anders riding them, first one and then the other, and sometimes both, dancing, pirouetting on their backs with the grace and precision of a ballerina performing on a solid floor. That was what she had started out to be, he'd been told, a ballerina. But the classical ballet hadn't offered enough glitter or excitement, and now she preferred to do the things that the great dancers did, only on the backs of two charging horses.

The danger of it though! The animals sometimes abreast, sometimes one following the other, and their mistress leaping, twirling, often somersaulting in mid-air from the first horse to the second. What if she should miss her step by the smallest inch, lose her footing on those great, surging, sweating bodies? She would fall to the hard floor, or worse, her fragile body would be trampled under those flying iron hoofs!

Alexis shuddered at the thought. Lori Anders was a great artist. But this thing the three of them were doing every night, this would sap her strength, cloud her judgment, ruin her perfect timing.

"Absolutely," he scolded them. "Absolutely this is the last bottle of wine I give you. Then I close up, and all of you go home."

Michael, the blond young man, glanced at him. "Are you breaking the law, Alexis?" he asked in a soft voice. "Are you afraid of the police? If they catch you staying open too late, we will pay your fine."

"I am tired," Alexis tried to explain.

"Then you go to bed, Alexis, and we will close the bar. You don't trust circus people? Have we once failed to pay our bill?"

"It isn't that, mein herr—"

"You are tired? Then bring

another glass and sit down with us, Alexis. We are all friends, aren't we? Come along now, sit down."

He was too exhausted to resist the invitation, much as it violated the habit of a lifetime. He brought the fourth glass, let them pour for him. It would be that much less that any of them would drink, he thought to himself.

"To your health, Alexis," Michael said. "To the excellence of your wine. And may we all meet again when we return next season."

Ah, Alexis thought, he should have said, *if* they all return next season. The way things were going, would all of them live that long?

He looked at them fondly. He had come to love them. Yes, he could say that. Admire them, their skill, their daring. Three beautiful young people. Three beautiful young bodies. With hot heads and passions.

Michael. Michael. Vandrak, the blond one, a trifle larger, heavier, sturdier perhaps. And Gerald, the dark one, the silent one. The Vandrak Brothers, that was what the posters said, and the stentorian voice of the ringmaster. But not blood brothers, Alexis knew. Brothers in a different way. Each putting his life into the other's hands, every day.

Alexis had seen them, high in that maze of ropes and wires over the center ring. Bare-chested, muscles rippling in arms and shoulders, Gerald in silver tights and Michael in gold, a pair of defiant young gods.

Alexis had seen many circuses, and he had seen many acts of the high wire. One person usually, whether a man or a girl, but this one person, moving slowly and carefully above a void, progressing finally to some limited acrobatics, usually not more than skipping rope. Or if there were more than one person it was a balancing act, and the trick was merely to get safely from one support pole to the other.

Ah, but the Vandraks; they were different! They actually cavorted on the high wire. Where other performers walked, they ran. They leaped, not carefully but with abandon; and somehow the quivering wire was always beneath both pairs of feet when they came down again.

That was the amazing, the impossible thing about it, people said. One man might manage his balance on that thin metal strand. One body could maintain a sympathetic rhythm with that living entity, the wire. But not two at the same time. For the movement of one to keep his balance would surely

throw the other off. Not so the Vandraks. They *were* one body, in perfect tune, perfect rhythm.

Except when they were clowning, of course. Having demonstrated teamwork, they played tricks on each other—or seemed to—at the climax of their performance. Like duelists they would stand face to face, each trying in some way to set the wire swaying so that his companion would topple off.

Madness! One or the other would eventually slip, fall, and save himself only by grasping the wire with his hands as he fell. While the other, the victor, would laugh in gleeful triumph. The spectators could hear that laugh, echoing eerily against the domed ceiling.

Suicidal, people said. Exciting, yes. Enough to make the audience squirm and scream. And finally to acclaim these fantastic young men with riotous applause. But suicidal nevertheless. An unrehearsed act, in which neither of the brothers knew who would stand and who would fall. And with no net beneath to catch them.

"Alexis," Michael said, "it is cold in this stable of yours, but you are sweating."

"I was thinking of your performance this afternoon."

"Oh, you saw it?"

"I've seen it nearly every day."

"Well, what do you think? Are we worth the price of admission?"

Alexis took out his big blue handkerchief and mopped his brow. For a moment he hesitated. "You want to know the truth?" he asked finally.

All three flicked glances at him. It was Gerald who said, "Naturally, the truth."

"Very well. I do not like your act."

They looked at one another in disbelief. "You are joking," Michael said. "We have the greatest highwire act in the world."

Alexis nodded in agreement. "But I do not like it."

Lori's green eyes challenged him, her lips, wet with red wine-dew, smiling. "My horses and I, Alexis, how do you like us?"

He shook his head. "Not at all."

Michael laughed then. He threw back his head, and his tousled mane of yellow hair flamed in the dim light. An offended, arrogant young god. He raised his wine glass and gave them all a toast. "Alexis Bubenoff, Circus Connoisseur!"

But Gerald, the dark one, didn't even smile. "Wait," he said, "he is serious."

"Serious, no. He is only trying to insult us so that we will leave."

"Shut up, Michael," Lori intervened. And she said it with such sharp, cruel incision that the golden young man, startled and hurt, stopped laughing. "Alexis is a customer, a member of the jury. He has a right to speak his mind." But she was not humble. She was sneering at him.

He was brave nevertheless. He had begun this, and he would finish it. He sipped his wine again.

"Tell us," Gerald urged quietly.

Alexis nodded. "I have been to many circuses. I go to laugh at the clowns, and to be thrilled by the daring and skill of acts like yours. You, my dear young friends, are skillful, you are daring—"

"But there is no thrill?" Gerald asked.

"Oh, yes—but the wrong kind." He was warming to his task now. "Wait, I will try to explain. What do I want to see at a circus? I want to see brave people doing dangerous things that I could never do myself."

"We invite danger," Gerald interrupted.

Alexis shook his head. "No, you do more than that. And this is what makes me sick inside. I appreciate it when you invite danger. I applaud. I rejoice. But I am sick when I see you invite death."

They were silent for a long minute. He did not know whether he had surprised them, or whether they were debating the accuracy of his judgment.

"Danger and death, it is the same thing," Gerald said finally.

Alexis shook his head stubbornly. "I have seen too many circuses," he reminded them. "I know the difference. There is a thrill in danger. You feel it for yourself, or when you watch others. It is a good clean feeling. It exhilarates. But that is not what I feel when I see the Vandraks on the wire or Lori Anders on her plunging white horses. For many there is perhaps the morbid fascination. For most people—for me—there is only the sick feeling.

"It is like watching some awful catastrophe—automobiles crashing and burning, skiers buried in an avalanche, or what so many of us older people remember too well—bombs exploding, buildings falling, the shrieks of agony, the moans of those discovering the bodies of loved ones. No, my dear friends, there is a difference. There is excitement in danger, but there are only ugliness and terror in death."

Not daring to look at one another now, the three looked only at him. "They come to watch us," Michael said, though his voice was hollow. "The

crowds are bigger than ever."

"Oh, yes. As they gather around the scene of a bloody accident. As they come to watch an execution. They come to watch you die."

"But we fool them."

"Maybe you do. For the moment. But they will wait. They are patient."

"Is it so wrong then?" Lori leaned forward, her eyes glittering like cold emeralds. "They are entertained."

Alexis disagreed. "Is that the way you want to entertain them? What is a circus supposed to be, my dear girl? A happy place, to bring children, to watch them laugh, to hear their cries of pleasure. It is also a place where old men like myself can be children again, laugh and be happy also. I do not want to contemplate death. You are ruining my circus, the circus I know."

"The manager will tell us if we are ruining his business!" Michael was flushed and angry.

"Managers. Oh, yes, the managers will make money. But the people, they will be the losers. Who are you trying to please, the ticket sellers or the audience?"

"He's crazy." Michael said it to the other two. "He's drunk. He's been sitting behind his bar all night, in consultation with his bottle of schnapps."

"He's telling the truth," Gerald argued softly.

Alexis wasn't a drinking man, but he reached across the table for the wine bottle and emptied it into his glass. Then he drank, too swiftly.

"I have seen many circuses," he told them quietly. "I have known many circus people. This has always been a convenient place for them to gather. They have come here to relax from the strain of the performance. I have listened to them, and I know them. Performers, artists, dedicated to entertainment, not to the macabre spectacle of death. I drink to them, to their noble profession."

He drained his glass, groaned out of his chair, and went to the bar. When he returned he brought an armful of bottles. He opened one and poured into all the glasses, his unsteady hand spilling red on the tablecloth.

"Now I want to talk, my friends," he continued. "I want to discuss how all this has come to be. What is it? Love? Which one of you loves the girl?"

Silence answered him.

"And which one of you does the girl love?"

They shrank from his concentrated gaze. Lori lit her own cigarette, neither of the Vandraks remembering his po-

liteness. Alexis watched her most of all. She had small hands, delicate fingers. A tiny girl really, exquisitely feminine, infinitely desirable.

"You don't need to tell me," he said. "I have seen you here, night after night. I have seen your performances. Last year I saw the Vandraks. And the year before that. I have eyes. I have ears. Many things have changed. May I begin with those previous years? Thank you."

He took another long sip of wine. It was strong, and he was not used to it, but he needed courage.

"In those other years you Vandraks were young. Oh, I remember. You were young, still learning your profession. Beautiful torsos, glistening with sweat. You two would be the greatest, people said. You strove for perfection, and you worked together perfectly. It was dazzling. That human bodies should be capable of such magnificent feats. Ah!"

He paused, caught up in a vision.

"Then this year there is a difference. You were no longer young somehow, and you were dedicated to something else. What? Finally I recognized it. You were no longer a team. Each of you was more interested in being better than the other, in being more daring.

A desperate competition. The climax of the act, trying to dislodge each other from the wire. It was pretending, yes, but it was also *real*."

"No," Gerald said suddenly.

"Oh, but yes. I have watched. I know. Do you think I mean you are trying to kill each other? No, not quite. Not yet. Each of you is trying to prove something about himself. You laugh up there on that wire. We can hear you from below. Each of you is trying to prove he can come closer than the other, closer to death. It will not be the one who dies who will be the loser. It will be the one who first shows fear. How far will you go? Will you still laugh as you are falling? Because you have won? Because you will have proved you are braver? Because Lori will have decided finally that she loves you? You, the dead man?"

"You're crazy!" Michael blurted.

"No, my young friend. You are crazy. You love this girl. Or you call it love. I call it madness. And you, Gerald, you are the same. Perhaps I could forgive Michael—he has always been impulsive. But you are a thinker. You, the son of a doctor, are intelligent. You read philosophy. But you suffer from the same madness. You have betrayed your profession.

You are no longer an artist. You are only trying to impress a girl."

Lori Anders met his gaze without flinching. "It is all my fault, I suppose?" But she didn't ask the question humbly or sorrowfully.

"Is it always a woman's fault when men are fools?" He toasted her with a sip of wine. "But you, my dear, are more than just a woman. I have watched you in the ring. How can it be that you submit your fragile body to such risks? One blow from those iron-shod hoofs could cripple you, ruin your beauty. One false step and you could fall between those beasts, be trampled to death. Why? You are no ordinary woman, who needs babies and a fireside and the protection of a man who loves you. You exist for thrills. The chance of being killed is the breath of life to you. You are either the bravest or the most foolhardy woman I have ever seen. And that is the secret of your fascination to the Vandraks. You are a *challenge* to their own courage."

Michael pounded his fist on the table, upsetting his glass. The spilled wine ran red across the cloth, like blood. "I love her!" he shouted.

Alexis shook his head in calm disagreement. "You call it love. You want to conquer her,

and to do this you must prove you have even more courage than she. You and Gerald try to outdo each other. But also you try to outdo the lady herself. Am I not right, Gerald?

"And you, Lori, you are still a woman. You want to be conquered by superior courage. You dare each of them. Each performance the dare becomes greater and greater. It is like a jumper who raises the bar another inch, and then another inch. Sooner or later the jump becomes humanly impossible. Each one of you is already perilously close to the limit. It is only a question of time now. Today, or tomorrow, or the day after—"

He picked up Michael's over-turned glass, refilled it, and did the same with the others. Then they all drank together solemnly.

"It will be a great shame," he went on. "The end of a promising young life. But what is worse is that several thousand people will be eyewitnesses to it. They will see the fall from the high wire, which will take an eternity. They will hear the thud on the floor. Or they will see the frail, lovely body disappear under the iron hoofs. They will hear the scream, and whichever of you it is, you will scream.

"And that will be the

tragedy. All those people will have come to be made happy, and they will see death. The circus will never be the same to them—never again... It is not good for children to see death."

Once more Alexis lurched to his feet and turned his back on them. He went behind the bar where he rummaged inside a drawer. When he found what he wanted, he brought it back and threw it on the table. It fell with a clatter.

"What's that?" Michael asked, startled, unbelieving.

"An old army revolver. Which army I don't remember—there have been so many going back and forth. But it's a serviceable weapon."

The gun was old, black, and it gleamed dully in the dim light. Dark, mysterious, it held the same fascination for the young people as a coiled snake.

"What are you going to do with it?" It was Lori's question, awed, yet with eagerness.

In answer Alexis made another gesture, and a single bullet clinked onto the table top, rolled for a second, then came to rest beside the gun. Ugly and tiny, only an inch long, but fatal-looking.

"I suggest," he added, "that you have the decency to finish your grisly game here so that all those innocent people will be spared the sight."

"What are you talking about?" Michael demanded.

"Russian roulette."

"Are you crazy?"

"Crazy? Ah, that word again. I don't think I am crazy when I ask you, in the name of all people who love the circus, to seek death here, in Alexis' Restaurant, rather than in the ring."

Michael stood up, sending his chair crashing backward. "Come on, Lori. The old man is drunk."

But the girl didn't move. Her eyes were unnaturally bright as they continued to gaze at the revolver. "Alexis," she asked, "who is to play?"

It was as he had suspected. Lori Anders was the initiator, the pacesetter. Michael retrieved his chair and sat down again.

"All three of you must play."

"Of course. I forgot. This isn't to be a duel, is it?"

"Only of nerve."

Alexis watched his three guests, measuring them. He flourished his big blue handkerchief. "The rules here are simple, much simpler than the game you play under the spotlights."

He took the revolver from the table and broke it open. "Six chambers, you see. All empty." With his handkerchief he wiped all the surfaces of

both the gun and the bullet. "You wonder why I take this precaution? It is for the protection of all of us, including myself. When the game is finished, there will be a dead body on the floor here. It will have to be explained to the police. So there must be no fingerprints other than those of the dead person. The gun must be wiped clean after each turn. And we must all tell the same story—that the deceased committed suicide. He or she threatened us with the revolver so that we could not interfere."

He slipped the bullet into one of the chambers and clicked the revolver closed. Handling it carefully inside the cloth, he placed it in the middle of the table.

"You simply twirl the cylinder. You cannot see which chamber lines up in firing position. There are six chambers. When you put the muzzle to your head and pull the trigger, you have thus only one chance in six of dying."

"It's insane," Michael began.

"Are you afraid?" Lori asked him.

His eyes blazed. "No more than you," he told her.

But no hand reached for the gun.

"In my country," Alexis hurried on, "this game is considered a way to display

courage. But for you three it can also be the solution to the problem of your lives. If all three of you play, there can be no further questioning of your courage. If the lady dies, you two men need no longer compete against each other, but can go back to being friends, a team again. If one of you men dies, the way is open for the other to claim the lady. She cannot refuse a man who has played Russian roulette for her sake. Come, let us drink to the solution!"

He lifted his own glass, and was pleased when the three, almost together, raised theirs and drank.

Michael reached for the revolver, weighed it in the palm of his hand. "If I had not had so much of that old devil's wine I wouldn't be doing this," he said.

He looked first at Gerald, long and steadily. "My dear friend," he said, "be more careful up there on the wire."

Then his gaze shifted to the girl. Her eyes were wide, soft and moist, glazed with an hypnotic fascination. "My darling Lori," he said, "I love you very much. But if I die, I hope you can be happy with Gerald."

The words were brave and noble, but the voice quavered, the hand trembled, and the flushed face glistened with

sweat. He would have faltered, but his impulsive grasping of the revolver could not be undone. He had betrayed himself. The other two waited remorselessly. It was too late now for a choice.

Michael lifted the gun, twirled the cylinder, placed the muzzle to his left ear. His eyes closed, his lips moved. Convulsively, his finger pressed the trigger.

There was only a dull click.

Then when he didn't move, Alexis had to take the gun from his limp hand. He began carefully to wipe it clean with the handkerchief.

Michael smiled weakly. "Well, that was an experience."

The other two remained silent, and it was impossible to tell whether they were relieved or disappointed.

"It is my turn now, I suppose," Gerald said finally.

He took the revolver, fondled it, twirled the cylinder several times. There was a pallor on him, a vision of doom in his eyes.

"Gerald, you're afraid," Michael said suddenly.

"Leave him alone!" Lori's eyes flashed with angry green fire. "You were afraid, too."

"I wasn't!"

"Then you're a liar."

"Didn't I take the gun first?"

"Shut up, Michael!" This came from Gerald in a harsh, cracking voice. "You don't have the wire or Lori to yourself quite yet."

Gerald's hand moved swiftly now. The muzzle of the revolver went to the right side of his head and instantly he pulled the trigger.

Again there was only the click.

Gerald slammed the gun on the table, closed his eyes for a moment, and let himself breathe. Calmly Alexis picked up the weapon and wiped it clean. Then he offered the gun, nestled in the blue handkerchief, to Lori.

She accepted it gingerly, and it seemed big and awkward in her small hand. It was with the same reluctance that she twirled the cylinder. Her breasts rose and fell with her quick breathing.

"Lori," Gerald said, "don't do it. This isn't a game for a woman."

Michael hesitated, but then he agreed. "Don't do it, Lori. You don't have to prove anything."

But it was as if telling her nothing need be proved was the very thing that forced her relentlessly to the proof. "Thank you both," she told them, and she raised the gun, put the muzzle to the side of

her head, and with a despairing resolution pulled the trigger.

Click.

Afterward she cried, convulsively, her whole body shaking with the sobs, tears streaming from her painted eyes and staining her face. Alexis pried the revolver from her tightly clenched fingers and began once again to wipe it clean.

It was Michael who first noticed him. "What are you doing that for?" he almost shouted.

"Getting ready for the second round."

"Second round! But how many—?"

"It can't go on indefinitely," Alexis reminded him. He handed the gun across the table. "I believe it's your turn again."

"No!" Michael stood up, recoiling from the weapon. "Haven't I already proved myself? I'm not afraid to die!"

Alexis was stubborn, insistent, pushing the gun farther toward Michael. "It is not merely a question of whether you are afraid to die. You actually want to die. You have shown it on the wire. You laugh at death every day. Laugh at it now, and take the gun."

"No!"

"You want to stop the game?"

"Why do I have to be first again?"

"Because it's your turn," Gerald put in.

Michael whirled on his partner. "I'm not going to be first again!"

"The more turns are taken, the narrower the odds get. There's an advantage to being first," Gerald said.

"Yes, but if I'm unlucky, you don't even have to take a turn. If there's so much advantage, why don't you take first turn this time, Gerald? Afraid?"

Gerald came to his feet, too, his dark face reddened with anger. "I am no coward. You know the things I do every day."

"Then use the gun!"

They confronted each other, eyes blazing, close to violence. It was the girl who put an end to it. Their flare-up had stopped her tears. She rose, as angry as either of them, but she spoke to Alexis.

"Is this the friendship, the team, that was so wonderful before I came along?" she demanded to know.

Alexis shrugged with an elaborate show of helplessness.

"Why don't you suggest I be first?" she asked Michael and Gerald. "Isn't it my daring that spurs you on?"

They stood silent before her. She looked at both of them for a moment, with utter scorn.

Then she grabbed her raincoat from a chair, and turned and walked away.

"Here's the money for the wine," Michael said, taking his coat, too, and throwing some bills on the table.

"Are you going after her?" Gerald asked.

"Why should I?" Michael walked away, threading among the tables.

"Alexis," Gerald said softly, "you're a sadistic devil." He drained what wine was left in his glass, then he departed, too.

Alexis went to the matinee performance that day. He sat in the highest row of seats, munched caramels, and enjoyed himself tremendously.

The Vandrak Brothers were superb, and so was Lori Anders and her white stallions. Better than ever, Alexis decided. Calm, sure, skilled, professional, flawless. He was thrilled, but the palms of his hands did not

sweat. It was a healthy excitement these three brilliant young performers engendered in the audience, not a morbid, subconscious wish to see them fall and die. And Alexis came away happy.

He did not wait for them to appear at his little bistro that evening, because he knew they would not. Before he closed up he drank a toast to their absence.

He sipped the sweet wine and laughed silently to himself. The revolver—that fearful revolver—every young lieutenant who joined the regiment had had to play the game. Alexis had been forced to play it himself, so many years ago—to prove his courage. Then afterward they had shown him—the revolver's firing pin had been filed off. It was impossible to explode a cartridge—the gun was harmless. He had taken it as a souvenir of the war—of defeat.

"Q"

Joe Gores

File #1: The Mayfield Case

In May 1966 Joe Gores, at the urging of the late Anthony Boucher, gave a speech at the monthly meeting of the Northern California Chapter of MWA (Mystery Writers of America). Being a full-time professional private eye at the time, Mr. Gores naturally chose his work as the subject matter of his talk, detailing through anecdotes the factual techniques of day-to-day skiptracing. After the speech Anthony Boucher suggested to Mr. Gores that he write a series of procedural stories, and when Mr. Gores relayed the suggestion to Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine we promptly encouraged him to go ahead—to create a fictional agency and true-to-life investigators.

Early in 1967 Mr. Gores sent us the first of his private-eye procedurals—about Daniel Kearny Associates, with home office in San Francisco. The scope of the agency's activities had been broadened beyond "repos" (repossessions—the recovery of a chattel, usually an automobile, when payments are in arrears). As Kearny, the tough head of the agency, says, "We're hired to investigate people who have defaulted, defrauded, or embezzled—money or goods—to find them if they've skipped out, and to return the property to the legal owner." Kearny trains his agents to be hard—not Spillane-hard, with spilled blood and shattered bones, but with a tough philosophy of life—the tough approach of, say, The Old Man in the Continental Op series by Dashiell Hammett.

Mr. Gores's first procedural fuses fact and fancy: it might be called a semidocumentary—a case history written as fiction. Its people are realistic, the events are based on factual procedures, and although told in short-story form, it has the hard, compelling smack of raw truth...

(see preceding page)

Detectives: DANIEL KEARNY ASSOCIATES

Tuesday, May 23rd: 8:15 a.m.

Larry Ballard was halfway to the Daniel Kearny Associates office before he remembered to switch on his radio. After a whine and a blast of static, O'Bannon's voice came on loudly in mid-transmission.

"... Bay Bridge yet, Oakland 3?"

"Coming up to the toll plaza now. The subject is three cars ahead of me. I'll need a front tail once he's off the bridge, over."

"Stand by. KDM 366 Control calling any San Francisco unit."

Ballard unclipped his mike and pressed the red TRANSMIT button. "This is SF 6. My location is Oak and Buchanan, moving east, over."

"Oakland 3 is tailing a red Comet convertible across Bay Bridge, license Charlie, X-Ray, Kenneth, 8-8-1. The legal owner, California Citizens Bank on Polk Street, wants car only—contract outlawed."

Oakland 3 cut in: "Wait by the Ninth and Bryant off-ramp, SF 6."

"Control standing by," said O'Bannon. "KDM 366 clear."

O'Bannon set down the hand mike on Giselle Marc's desk, leaving it flipped to MONITOR. He was a wiry red-haired man about 40, with twinkling blue eyes, freckles, and a hard-bitten drinker's face.

"Who's SF 6? The new kid?"

"Right. Larry Ballard. With us a month yesterday." Giselle was a tall lean blonde who had started with DKA as a part-time file girl while in college; after graduation two years before, she had taken over the Cal-Cit Bank desk. "He's a green pea but he's eager and maybe—just maybe—he can think."

O'Bannon grunted. "The Great White Father around?"

"Down in his cubbyhole—in a vile mood."

O'Bannon grimaced and laid his expense-account itemization on her desk with great reverence. Giselle regarded it without enthusiasm.

"Why don't you do your own dirty work, O'B?" she demanded.

Same day: 10:00 a.m.

Ballard was lanky, well knit, in his early twenties, with blue eyes already hardened by his

month with DKA. He was stopped, by Dan Kearny himself, at the top of the narrow stairs leading to the second floor of the old Victorian building that housed the company offices.

"That Comet in the barn?"

"Yes, sir," said Ballard.

"Terrif. Any static?" Kearny was compact and powerful, with a square pugnacious face, massive jaw, and cold gray eyes which invariably regarded the world through a wisp of cigarette smoke.

"I front-tailed him from the freeway. When he parked on Howard Street, Oakland 3 and I just wired up the Comet and drove it away."

Kearny clapped Ballard's shoulder and went on. Ballard entered the front office, which overlooked Golden Gate Avenue through unwashed bay windows. Three assignments were in his basket on the desk of Jane Goldson, the phone receptionist with the Liverpool accent: through her were channeled all assignments, memos, and field reports.

Carrying the case sheets, Ballard descended to the garage under the building. Along the right wall were banks of lockers for personal property; along the left, small partitioned offices used by the seven San Francisco field men. He paused to review

his new cases before leaving.

The most puzzling one involved a new Continental, financed through Cal-Cit Bank, which had been purchased by a Jocelyn Mayfield, age 23. She and her roommate, Victoria Goodrich, lived at 31 Edith Alley and were case workers for San Francisco Social Services. What startled Ballard was the size of the delinquent payments—\$198.67 each—and the contract balance of over \$7000. On a welfare worker's salary? Even though her parents lived in the exclusive St. Francis Woods area, they were not cosigners on the contract.

From his small sound-proofed office at the rear of the garage Dan Kearny watched Ballard leave. Kearny had been in the game for over half of his 43 years, and still hadn't figured out the qualities which made a good investigator; only time would tell if Ballard had them. Kearny jabbed an intercom button with a blunt finger.

"Giselle? Send O'Bannon down here, will you?"

He lit a Lucky, leaned back to blow smoke at the ceiling. O'B had come with him six years before, when Kearny had resigned from Walter's Auto Detectives to start DKA with one car and this old Victorian building which had been a bawdy house in the '90s; and

reviewing O'B's' expense accounts still furnished Kearny with his chief catharsis.

He smeared out the cigarette; through the one-way glass he could see O'Bannon approaching the office, whistling, his hands in pockets, his blue eyes innocent of guile. When he came in, Kearny shook out a cigarette for himself and offered the pack. "How's Bella, O'B?"

"She asks when you're bringing the kids for *cioppino* again."

Kearny indicated the littered desk. "I'm two weeks behind in my billing. Oh . . . this *expense* account, O'B." Without warning his fist smashed down in sudden fury. "*Dammit, if you think . . .*"

O'Bannon remained strangely tranquil during the storm. When Kearny finally ran down, the red-headed man cleared his throat and spoke.

"Giants leading three-two, in the third. Marichal—"

"What do you mean?" Kearny looked stunned. "What the—"

O'Bannon fished a tiny transistor radio from his pocket, then apologetically removed miniature speakers from both his ears. Kearny gaped.

"You mean—while I—you were listening to the ball game?"

O'Bannon nodded dolorously. Speechless with rage, Kearny jerked out the expense-account checkbook; but then his shoulders began shaking with silent laughter.

Same day: 9:30 p.m.

Larry Ballard parked on upper Grand; above him, on Telegraph Hill, loomed the concrete cone of Coit Tower, like a giant artillery piece about to be fired. Edith Alley ran half a block downhill toward Stockton; Jocelyn Mayfield and her roommate, Victoria Goodrich, had the lower apartment in a two-story frame building.

The girl who answered the bell wore jeans and sweatshirt over a chunky figure; her short hair was tinted almost white. Wide cheekbones gave her a Slavic look.

"Is Jocelyn here?" Ballard asked.

"Are you a friend of hers?" Her voice was harshly attractive.

Ballard took a flier. "I was in one of her sociology classes."

"At Stanford?" She stepped back. "Sorry if I sounded anti-social. Sometimes male clients get ideas, y'know?"

He followed her into the apartment. "You must be Vikki—Josie has mentioned you. You don't act like a social worker."

"Say something to me in psychology"? Actually, I was a waitress down in North Beach before I started with Social Services."

There were cheap shades at the windows of the rather barren living room, a grass mat on the floor, a wicker chair and a couch, and an ugly black coffee table. The walls were a depressing brown. It was not a room in keeping with monthly automobile payments of \$200.

"We're going to repaint eventually," Vikki said. "I guess."

Ballard nodded. "Has Josie mentioned selling the Continental?"

"The Continental?" She frowned. "That belongs to Hank—we both use my Triumph. I don't think he wants to sell it; he just got it."

"Hank, huh? Say, what's his name and address? I can—"

Just then a key grated in the front door. Damn! Two minutes more would have done it. Now the subject was in the room, talking breathlessly. "Did Hank call? He wasn't at his apartment, and—"

"Here's an old friend of yours," Vikki cut in brightly.

Ballard was staring. Jocelyn Mayfield was the loveliest girl he had ever seen, her fawnlike beauty accented by shimmering jet hair. Her mouth was small

but full-lipped, her brows slightly heavy for a girl, her brown liquid eyes full-lashed. She had one of those supple patrician figures maintained by tennis on chilly mornings.

"Old friend?" Her voice was low. "But I don't even know him!"

That tore it. Ballard blurted, "I'm—uh—representing California Citizens Bank. We've been employed to investigate your six-hundred dollar delinquency on the 1967 Continental. We—"

"You dirty—" The rest of Vikki's remark was not that of a welfare worker. "I bet you practice lying to yourself in front of a mirror. I bet—"

"Vikki, hush." Jocelyn was blushing, deeply embarrassed. Vikki stopped and her eyes popped open wide.

"You mean you *did* make the down payment on that car? It's registered in *your* name? You fool! He couldn't make a monthly payment on a free lunch, and you—" She stopped, turned on Ballard. "Okay, buster. Out."

"Vikki, please." Then Jocelyn said to Ballard, "I thought—I had no idea the payments—by Friday I can have all the money."

"I said *out*, buster," Vikki snapped. "You heard her—you'll get your pound of flesh. And that's *all* you'll get—unless

I tear Josie's dress and run out into that alley yelling rape."

Ballard retreated; he had no experience in handling a Vikki Goodrich. And there was something about Jocelyn Mayfield—private stock, O'Bannon would have called her. She'd been so obviously let down by this Hank character; and she *had* promised to pay by Friday.

Monday, May 29th: 3:30 p.m.

Jane Goldson winked and pointed toward the Office Manager's half-closed door. "She's in a proper pet, she is, Larry."

He went in. Kathy Onoda waved him to a chair without removing the phone from her ear. She was an angular girl in her late twenties, with classical Japanese features. Speaking into the phone her voice was hesitant, nearly unintelligible with sibilants.

"I jus' rittre Joponee girr in your country verry littre time." She winked at Ballard. "So sorry, too, preese. I roose job I... ah... ah so. Sank you verry much. Buddha shower brassings."

She hung up and exclaimed jubilantly, "Why do those stupid s.o.b.'s always fall for that phony Buddha-head accent?" All trace of it had disappeared. "You, hotshot, you sleeping with this Mayfield chick? One report, dated last Tuesday, car

in hands of a third party, three payments down—and you take a promise. Which isn't kept."

"Well, you see, Kathy, I thought—"

"You want me to come along and hold your hand?" Her black eyes glittered and her lips thinned with scorn. "Go to Welfare and hint that she's sleeping around; tell her mother that our investigation is going to hit the society pages; get a line on this Hank no-goodnik." She jabbed a finger at him. "Go gettem bears!"

Ballard fled, slightly dazed as always after a session with Kathy. Driving toward Twin Peaks, he wondered why Jocelyn had broken her promise. Just another deadbeat? He hated to believe that. Apart from the Mayfield case he was doing a good job. He still carried a light case load, but he knew that eventually he would be responsible for as many as 75 files simultaneously, with reports due every three days on each of them except skips, holds, and contingents.

The Mayfield house was on Darien Way in St. Francis Woods; it was a huge pseudo-colonial with square columns and a closely trimmed lawn like a gigantic golf green. Inside the double garage was a new Mercedes. A maid with iron-gray hair took his card, returned

with Jocelyn's mother—an erect, pleasant-faced woman in her fifties.

"I'm afraid I'm not familiar with Daniel Kearny Associates."

"We represent California Citizens Bank," said Ballard. "We've been engaged to investigate certain aspects of your daughter's finances."

"Jocelyn's finances?" Her eyes were lighter than her daughter's, with none of their melting quality. "Whatever in the world for?"

"She's six hundred dollars delinquent on a 1967 Continental."

"Indeed?" Her voice was frigid. "Perhaps you had better come in."

The living room had a red brick fireplace and was made strangely tranquil by the measured ticking of an old-fashioned grandfather's clock. There was a grand piano and a magnificent Oriental rug.

"Now. Why would my daughter supposedly do such a thing?"

"She bought it for a"—his voice gave the word emphasis—"man."

She stiffened. "You cannot be intimating that my daughter's personal life is anything but exemplary! When Mr. Mayfield hears this—this infamous gossip, he—he is most important in

local financial circles."

"So is California Citizens Bank."

"Oh!" She stood up abruptly. "I suggest you leave this house."

Driving back, Ballard knew he had made the right move to bring parental pressure on Jocelyn Mayfield, but the knowledge gave him scant pleasure. There had been a framed picture of her on the piano; somehow his own thoughts, coupled with the picture, had made his memory of their brief meeting sharper, almost poignant.

Same day: 5:15 p.m.

Dan Kearny lit a Lucky. "I think you know why I had you come back in, Ballard. The Mayfield case. Are you *proud* of that file?"

"No, sir." He tried to meet Kearny's gaze. "But I think she broke her promise to pay because this deadbeat talked her into it."

"You took a *week* to find that out?" Kearny demanded. "Giselle found out that the subject walked off her job at Welfare last Friday night—took an indefinite leave without bothering to leave any forwarding address."

Kearny paused to form a smoke ring. He could blast this kid right out of the tank, but he didn't want to do that. "I start-

ed in this game in high school, Ballard, during the Depression. Night-hawking cars for Old Man Walters down in L.A. at five bucks per repo—cover your own expenses, investigate on your own time. Some of those Oakies would have made you weep, but I couldn't *afford* to feel sorry for them. This Mayfield dame's in a mess. Is that our fault? Or the *bank's*?"

"No, sir. But there are special circumstances—"

"Circumstances be *damned*! We're hired to investigate people who have defaulted, defrauded, or embezzled—money or goods—to find them if they've skipped out, and to return the property to the legal owner. Mayfield's contract is *three months* delinquent and you spin your wheels for a whole week. Right now the bank is looking at a seven-thousand dollar loss." He ground out his cigarette and stood up. "Let's take a ride."

Later, ringing the bell at 31 Edith Alley, Ballard warned, "This Victoria Goodrich is tough. I know she won't tell us anything."

Vikki opened the door and glared at him. "*You* again?"

Kearny moved past Ballard so smoothly that the girl had to step back to avoid being walked on, and they were inside. "My name is Turk," he said. "I'm

with the legal department of the bank."

She had recovered. "You should be *ashamed*, hiring this person to stir up trouble for Josie with her folks. Okay, so she's two lousy payments behind. I'll make one of them now, and next week she can—"

"*Three* payments. And since the vehicle is in the hands of a third party, the contract is void." He shot a single encompassing look around the living room, then brought his cold gray eyes back to her face. "We know Miss Mayfield has moved out. Where is she living now?"

"I don't know." She met his gaze stubbornly.

Kearny nodded. "Fraudulent contract; flight to avoid prosecution. We'll get a grand-theft warrant for her seven-thousand dollar embezzle—"

"Good God!" Vikki's face crumpled with dismay. "Really, I don't know Hank's addr—I mean I don't know where she's gone. I—" Under his unwinking stare, tears suddenly came into her voice. "His wife's on welfare; he's no damn good. Once when he'd been drinking he—he put his hands on me. I guess she's with him, but I don't know where."

"Then what's Hank's last name?"

She sank down on the couch with her face in her hands and

merely shook her head. Ignoring her, Kearny turned to Ballard. "Sweet kid, this Mayfield. She *steals* the woman's husband, then a car, then—"

"No!" Vikki was sobbing openly. "It isn't like that! They were separated—"

Kearny's voice lashed out. "What's his last name?"

"I won't—"

"Hank *what*?"

"You've no right to—"

"—to throw your trashy roommate in jail? We can and we will."

She raised a tear-ravaged face. "If you find the car will Josie stay out of prison?"

"I can't make promises of immunity on behalf of the bank."

"His name is Stuber. Harold Stuber." She wailed suddenly to Ballard. "Make him stop! I've told everything I know—everything."

Kearny grunted. "You've been most helpful," he said, then strode out. Ballard took a hesitant step toward the hunched, sobbing girl, hesitated, and then ran after Kearny.

"Why did you do that to her?" he raged. "Now she's crying—"

"And we've got the information we came after," Kearny said.

"But you said to her—"

"But, *hell*," He called Con-

trol on the radio. When Giselle answered he said, "Mayfield unit reportedly in the hands of a Harold Stuber—S-t-u-b-e-r. Check him through the Polk Directory." He lit a cigarette and puffed placidly at it, the mike lying in his lap.

"The only listing under Harold Stuber shows a residence at 1597 Eighteenth Street; employment, bartender; wife, Edith."

"Thanks, Giselle. SF 6 clear."

"KDM 366 Control clear."

Driving out to Eighteenth Street, Ballard was glad it had been Vikki, not Jocelyn Mayfield, who had been put through the meat grinder. Vikki wasn't soft, yet Kearny had reduced her to tears in just a few vicious minutes.

The address on Eighteenth Street was a dirty, weathered stucco building above the heavy industrial area fringing Potrero Hill. It was a neighborhood losing its identity in its battle against the wrecker's ball. Inside the apartment house, the first-floor hall wore an ancient threadbare carpet with a design like spilled animal intestines.

"Some of this rubbed off on your true love," remarked Kearny.

Ballard gritted his teeth. Their knock was answered by a man two inches over six feet,

wide as the doorway. His rolled-up sleeves showed hairy, muscle-knotted arms; his eyes were red-rimmed and he carried a glass of whiskey. He looked as predictable as a runaway truck.

Kearny was unimpressed. "Harold Stuber?"

"He don't live here no more." The door began to close.

"How about Edith Stuber?"

The hand on the door hesitated. "Who's askin'?"

"Welfare." When Kearny went forward the huge man wavered, lost his inner battle, and stepped back. The apartment smelled of chili and unwashed diapers; somewhere in one of the rooms a baby was screaming.

"Edie," yelled the big man, "coupla guys from Welfare."

She was a boldly handsome woman in her thirties, with dark hair and flashing black eyes. Under a black sweater and black slacks her body was full-breasted, wide-hipped, heavily sensual.

"Welfare?" Her voice became a whine. "D'ya have my check?"

"Your check?" Kearny's eyes flicked to the big man with simulated contempt. He whirled to Ballard. "Johnson, note that the recipient is living common-law with a Caucasian male, height six-two, weight two-

twenty, estimated age thirty-nine. Recipient should—"

"Hey!" yelled the woman, turning furiously on the big man, "if I lose my welfare check—"

Kearny cut in brusquely, "We're only interested in your legal spouse, Mrs. Stuber."

Her yells stopped like a knife slash. "You come about Hank? He ain't lived here in five months. When he abandoned me an' the kid—"

"But the Bureau knows he gets in touch with you."

"You could call it that." She gave a coarse laugh. "Last Wednesday he come over in a big Continental, woke us—woke me up an' made a row 'bout Mr. Kleist here slee-bein' my acquaintance. Then the p'lice come an' Hank, he slugged one of 'em. So they took him off."

Kearny said sharply, "What about the Continental?"

"It set here to the weekend, then it was gone."

"What's your husband's current residence address?"

She waved a vague arm. "He never said." Her eyes widened. "He give me a phone number, but I never did call it; knew it wouldn't do no good." Behind her the baby began crying; the big man went away. Her eyes were round with the effort of remembering. "Yeah. 860-4645."

Back in the agency car, Kearny lit a cigarette. "If it's any consolation, there's the reason for her broken promise. He gets busted Wednesday night, gets word to Mayfield Thursday, on Friday she quits her job. Saturday she sees him at the county jail, finds out where he left the car, drops it into dead storage somewhere near his apartment, and holes up there to wait until he gets out. Find her, you find the car."

"Can't we trace the phone number this one gave us?"

Kearny gestured impatiently. "That'll just be some gin mill."

The next day the Mayfield folder went into the SKIP tub and a request went to the client for a copy of the subject's credit application. Skiptracing began on the case. The phone number proved to be that of a tough Valencia Street bar. DKA's Peninsula agent found that Stuber had drawn a thirty-to-ninety-day rap in the county jail, the heavy sentence resulting from a prior arrest on the same charge. Stuber said he still lived at Eighteenth Street and denied knowing the subject. A stakeout of the jail's parking lot during visiting hours was negative.

Police contacts reported that the Continental had not been impounded, nor was it picking

up parking tags anywhere in San Francisco. Stuber had no current utilities service, no phone listing. The time involved in checking dead-storage garages would have been excessive. By phone Giselle covered Welfare; neighbors around the Edith Alley and Eighteenth Street addresses, the subject's former contacts at Stanford, Bartender's Local Number 41, all the references on the credit application. Ballard supplemented with field contact of postmen, gas station attendants, newsboys, and small store owners.

None of it did any good.

Thursday, June 8th: 7:15 p.m.

Ballard was typing reports at home when his phone rang. He had worked thirteen cases that day, including two skips besides Mayfield; it took him a few moments to realize that it was her voice.

"What have I done to make you hate me so?" she asked.

"I'm all for you personally, Josie, but I've got a job to do. Anyway, if I let up it just would mean that someone else would keep looking."

"I love him." She said it without emotion—a fact by which she lived. "I love him and he said he would leave me if I let them take his car while he's—away. I couldn't stand

that. It's the first thing of beauty he's ever possessed, and he can't give it up."

Ballard was swept by a sudden wave of sympathy, almost of desire for her; he could picture her, wearing something soft, probably cashmere, her face serious, her mouth a pink bud. How could Stuber have such a woman bestowed on him, yet keep thinking of a damned automobile? How could he make Jocelyn see Stuber as he really was?

"Josie, the bank objects so strongly to Stuber that they've declared the contract void; as long as he had possession, they'd hold the account in jeopardy. Surrender it. Get him something you can afford."

"I couldn't do that," she said gravely, and hung up.

Ballard got a beer from the refrigerator and sat down at the kitchen table to drink it. After only one meeting and a single phone conversation, was he falling for Jocelyn Mayfield? He felt a deep physical attraction, sure; but it wasn't unsatisfied desire which was oppressing him now. It was the knowledge that he was going to keep looking for the car, that there was no way to close the case without Jocelyn being badly hurt emotionally.

Friday, June 16: 10:15 a.m.

"If I see her mother once more, she'll call the cops," Ballard objected. "Stuber gets out June twenty-eighth. We could tail him—"

"The bank's deadline is next Tuesday—the twentieth," said Kearny. "Then their dealer recourse expires and they have to eat their loss—whatever it is. Find the girl, Ballard, and get the car."

The intercom buzzed and Jane Goldson said, "Larry's got a funny sort of call on 1504, Mr. Kearny. She sounds drunk or something."

Kearny gestured and stayed on as Ballard picked up. The voice, which Ballard recognized as Jocelyn's, was overflowing with hysteria.

"I can't stand it any more and I want you to know you're to blame!" she cried. "My parentsh hate me—can't see Hank on weekends 'cause I know you'll be waiting, like vultures—sho—I did it." She gave a sleepy giggle. "I killed myself."

"You're a lively-sounding corpse," said Kearny in a syrupy voice.

"I know who you are!" Surprisingly, she giggled again. "You made Vikki cry. Poor Vikki'll be all sad. I took all the pillsh."

Kearny, who appeared to have been doodling on a sheet of scratch paper, held up a

crudely printed note: *Have Kathy trace call.* Ballard switched off, jabbed Kathy's intercom button. Please God, he thought, let her be all right. What had brought her to this extremity?

"I'll trace it," rapped Kathy. "Keep that connection open."

He punched back into 1504.

"—Ballard's shoul when I die—lose car, lose Hank, sho—"

Her sing-song trailed off with a tired sigh; there was a sudden heavy jar. After a moment a light tapping began, as if the receiver were swinging at the end of the cord and striking a table leg. They stared at one another across the empty line.

The intercom buzzed, making Ballard jump. Kathy said, "469 Eddy Street, Apartment 206, listed under Harold Stein—that'll be Stuber. The phone company'll get an ambulance and oxygen over there. Good hunting."

Ballard was already out of his chair. "It's a place on Eddy Street—we've got to get to her!"

As they rocketed up Franklin for the turn into Eddy Street, Ballard said, "We shouldn't have hounded her that way. Do you think she'll be all right?"

"Depends on how many of what she took. The address—between Jones and Leaven-

worth in the Tenderloin—crummy neighborhood. The nearest dead-storage garage is around the corner on Jones Street. We can—hey! What the hell are you doing?"

Ballard had slammed the car to a stop in front of a rundown apartment building. "I've got to get to her!" he cried. He was halfway out the car door when Kearny's thick fingers closed around Ballard's tie and yanked him bodily back inside.

"You're a repo man, Ballard," he growled. "That might not mean much to you but it does to me, a hell of a lot. *First* we get the car." Ballard, suddenly desperate, drew back a threatening fist. Kearny's slaty eyes didn't flicker; he said, "Don't let my gray hairs make a coward of you, sonny."

Ballard slumped back on the seat. He nodded. "Okay. Drive on, damn you."

As they turned into Jones Street, a boxy white Public Health ambulance wheeled into Eddy and smoked to a stop on the wrong side of the street. At the garage half a block down, Kearny went in while Ballard waited in the car. Why had he almost slugged Kearny? For that matter, why had he backed down?

Kearny stuck his head in the window. "It's easy when you know where to look." He laid a

hand on Ballard's arm. "On your way up there call Giselle and have her send me a Hold Harmless letter."

Ballard circled the block and parked behind the ambulance. On the second floor he saw three tenants gaping by the open door of Apartment 206. A uniformed cop put a hand on Ballard's chest.

"I was on the phone with her when she fainted."

"Okay. The sergeant'll wanna talk with you anyway."

She was on the floor by the phone stand, her head back and her mouth open. Her skin was very pale; the beautifully luminous eyes were shut. A tracheal tube was down her throat so that she could breathe. The skirt had ridden high up one sprawled thigh, and Ballard pulled it down.

"Is she—will she—"

The intern was barely older than Ballard, but his hair already was thinning. "We'll give her oxygen in the ambulance." He opened his hand to display a bottle. "Unless she had something in here besides what's on the label, she should be okay."

Ballard glanced around the tiny two-roomer. There was a rumpled wall bed with a careless pile of paperbacks on the floor beside it; he could picture her cooped up there day after day, while her depression deep-

ened. Above the flaked-silver radiator was a large brown water stain from the apartment upstairs; it was a room where dreams would die without a whimper.

Ballard backed off; instead of talking to the detective in charge he would call her folks so that their own doctor could be at the hospital to prevent it being listed as an attempted suicide.

That afternoon DKA closed the file on the Mayfield case. She was released from the hospital a few days later and returned to 31 Edith Alley. Without really knowing why, Ballard went over there one Tuesday evening to see her; she refused to come out of the bedroom, and he ended up in the living room, drinking tea with Vikki Goodrich.

"She's grateful for what you did, Larry. But, as far as anything further—" She paused delicately. "Hank Stuber will be out tomorrow." She paused again, her face suddenly troubled. "She's going to surprise him and pick him up in my Triumph; he doesn't know about the Continental. After that I guess she'll be—well, sort of busy."

Leaving the apartment, Ballard told himself that ended it. Yet he sat behind the wheel of his car for a long time without

turning the ignition key. Damn it, that *didn't* end it! Too much raw emotion had been bared. . .

Thursday, June 29th: 8:15 a.m.

Each short journalistic phrase in the *Chronicle*, read over his forgotten restaurant eggs, deepened his sense of loss, his realization that something bright in his life had been permanently darkened.

Police officers, answering a call late last night to 31 Edith Alley, were greeted by Miss Victoria Goodrich, 24, a case worker with San Francisco Social Services. The hysterical Miss Goodrich said that her roommate, Jocelyn Mayfield, 23, and Harold P. Stuber, 38, had entered the apartment at eight p.m. Stuber had been drinking, she said; by ten p.m. he had become so abusive that he struck Miss Mayfield. According to Miss Goodrich he then departed, and Miss Mayfield locked herself in the bathroom.

At eleven p.m. Miss Goodrich called for police assistance. They broke down the locked door to find Miss Mayfield on the tile floor in a pool of blood. Both wrists had been slashed with a razor

blade. The girl was D.O.A. at San Francisco General Hospital. Stuber, an unemployed bartender who was released only yesterday afternoon from the county jail, is being sought on an assault charge.

Ballard thought, I've never even seen the son-of-a— I could pass him on the street and not even know it. He felt a sudden revulsion, almost a nausea, at his own role in the destruction of Jocelyn Mayfield. Half an hour later he slammed the *Chronicle* down on Kearny's desk.

"Stuber said he'd leave her if we took the Continental while he was in jail. He left her, all right."

Kearny looked at him blandly. "I've already seen it."

"If we hadn't taken the car—"

"—she would have killed herself next month or next year over some other deadbeat. She was an emotional loser, Ballard, a picker of wrong men." He paused, then continued drily, "It's the end of the month, Ballard. I'd like to review your case file."

Ballard dropped his briefcase on the littered desk. "You know what you can do with your case file, Kearny? You can take it and—"

Kearny listened without

heat, then reached for his cigarettes. He lit one and sneered, through the new smoke, "What will you do now, Ballard—go home and cry into your pillow? She's going to be dead for a long long time."

Ballard stared at him, speechless, as if at a new species of animal—the square pugnacious face, the hard eyes which had seen too much, the heavy cleft chin, the nose slightly askew from some old argument which had gone beyond words. A long slow shudder ran through the younger man's frame. Work—that was Kearny's

answer to everything. Work, while Jocelyn Mayfield lay with a morgue tag on her toe. Work, while scar tissue began its slow accretion over the wound.

All right, then—work. Very slowly he drew his assignments from the briefcase. "Let's get at it then," he said in a choked voice.

Dan Kearny nodded to himself. A girl had died; a man had had his first bitter taste of reality. And in the process DKA bought themselves an investigator. Maybe, with a few more rough edges knocked off, a damned good investigator.



Stuart Palmer

Hildegarde Withers Is Back

Yes, by the patron saint of amateur detectives, Hildegarde Withers is back! It's like a breath of spring after a long hard winter. Hildegarde Withers—the famous female ferret, the spinster schoolteacher snoop, the petticoat private eye, the lady (and we do mean lady) manhunter—the irrepressible, irresistible, irreproachable Hildy is back in action, once more the self-appointed gadfly of Inspector Oscar Piper, an extraordinarily patient man notorious for his impatience.

And, in this long novelet, you will meet an interesting cast of characters: Cecily Barth—one of the most glamorous of the early movie queens who once rivaled Theda Bara. Boris Abbas—violent-tempered ex-professional wrestler, now a TV producer doing the life story of the former “Love Goddess of the Silver Screen.” Gary Twill—a Hollywood writer in the twilight of his checkered career. Jane Roberts—blonde curvaceous confidential secretary. Lilith Lawrence—dark-haired, billowy-hipped star on her way up . . . and assorted pips and squeaks.

Hildegarde was never more lively, more persistent, more amusing. She's a real tonic on downbeat days . . .

Detective: HILDEGARDE WITHERS

A muffled din sounded in the anteroom, and then the door banged open and an unexpected guest backed her way into the Inspector's office, fending off the uniformed guardian of the gates with handbag and umbrella. “Oscar!

Do something!” she cried.

“Hildegarde Withers, as I live and breathe!” gasped the grizzled skipper of Homicide, managing to get out of his swivel chair and restore some semblance of order. “Don't mind the sergeant, he's a new

man and didn't know you from Adam—I mean, Eve. If you'd let me know you were coming to town I'd have had the welcome mat out. But I thought you were safely retired, and busy with your African daisies out in California."

"African violets, Oscar." The schoolteacher was preening her feathers like a ruffled Buff Orpington. "And if you dare to add insult to injury by making one of your characteristic snide remarks about my new hat—"

"That's a *hat*? I thought it was a fallen soufflé!"

"This is hardly the time for persiflage. Not when I've just flown all the way across the country to come to your aid on the Barth case."

"By broomstick? Well, dear lady, we've been getting along pretty well here at Centre Street without any amateur help since you quit being self-appointed gadfly to the Police Department—" Here Inspector Oscar Piper broke into a slow double-take. "The *what* case?"

"Barth, Cecily Barth. You do recall the name?"

"It may ring a bell somewhere, but just now—"

"Oscar, I sometimes think that you are being intentionally dense! Cecily Barth happens to have been one of Hollywood's most famous stars in her day.

You yourself must have been just about the right age to have had a schoolboy crush on her, back when she was the Love Goddess of the Silver Screen, unquote."

"I used to be a Tom Mix fan, myself," he said almost apologetically.

"But even you must have seen some of the recent newspaper publicity about how the great independent television producer Mr. Boris Abbas is producing the life story of Cecily Barth as a special on filmed TV, bringing a famous Hollywood writer here to do the script in collaboration with Cecily herself, testing dozens of young sexpot actresses to play the leading role, and so on and so forth."

The Inspector carefully relighted his cigar. "Oh, *that* one! I've got the flimsies here somewhere. Yeah, right here. You call it the Barth case, but it was some scenario writer name of Gary Twill who did the Dutch Act out of his hotel window late yesterday afternoon. According to all reports, it was a simple case of suicide."

"Suicide is never simple! Oscar, most criminologists agree that falls from high windows, like drownings from canoes, are automatically suspect. Perfect murders, perhaps. I am quite aware of the fact that you

police don't believe there is any such thing as the perfect murder, but remember, if it were perfect, you wouldn't know of it! And Gary Twill's death was no suicide, I'll wager a pretty penny. I feel it in my bones."

"Of which you have a complete set," Oscar Piper put in unkindly but accurately, softening the wisecrack with a Hibernian-type grin. "Look, Hildegard, old girl, I'm personally delighted to have you back in town and tonight will joyfully buy you a spaghetti dinner at any place you name. I think I know just how bad you're itching to make like the old firehorse at the sound of the siren, but believe me, this case just ain't it!"

"Isn't it," she corrected automatically.

"Okay, *isn't*. This Hollywood writer, the guy named Twill, had been out of work a while and he got this plush assignment to come to New York and do a TV script, with free hotel room and everything—and then it all went blooie. He had a thing going with the boss's playgirl-type secretary and he had a contract and he lost them both at the same time, the girl *and* the job. So he did the Dutch Act, like I said. What more do you want, chimes?"

"A suicide note or an eyewitness would help! Oscar, there is more here than meets the eye. I have known some screenwriters in my time—Los Angeles is crawling with them. They don't take their lives when they lose a girl, or a job either; they feel sure that another one, girl or job, will be along in a minute. Meanwhile, like Miniver Cheevy, they keep on drinking."

"Miniver *who*?"

"A character in an almost forgotten poem by an almost forgotten poet named Edwin Arlington Robinson. No matter. I became interested in this case because of a certain letter which was shown to me over a week ago by a neighbor of mine out in Santa Monica, a Mrs. Marcia Connell, whose three children are usually trampling down my flowerbeds. She happens to be the niece and presumably the only blood relation of the once glamorous Cecily Barth."

"I've caught glimpses of the old lady arriving on Christmas and birthdays, in an ancient Cadillac with equally ancient chauffeur, to deliver presents to her grandniece and grand-nephews. Lady Bountiful—but she *never* has helped when Marcia needed a new washer and dryer or the children's teeth needed straightening. And

I've seen Cecily mentioned in the newspapers; she's a fanatic anti-vivisectionist, makes speeches for the SPCA and Humane Society drives, and once-before arthritis totally crippled her below the belt and confined her to a wheel chair—she even tried to lead a protest march against the Chicago stockyards because of what she considered cruelty in slaughtering methods. Quite a personality, Oscar. Would you care to read the letter she wrote to her niece, a week or more ago?"

"Yes, but not very much," said Oscar Piper. Nevertheless he meekly accepted the note, neatly typed on Hotel Harlow Towers stationery, and read:

Darling,

Rain rain rain here in New York, and I wish I was home in my own house in Coldwater Canyon where I belong. I hope Jack is still working at Douglas and bringing home his paycheck intact. And darling Loramae and Timmy and Ricky! I hope to be back home for Christmas, but if I am still tied up here I have just oodles of goodies I've collected in these wonderful toy stores like Schwarz's, all wrapped and ready.

The script goes well, except that Gary Twill, the writer—who is right handy in the room

next to my suite—is sometimes a bit stubborn and wants documentation for things that happened instead of trusting my memory, which as you know is perfect. I usually get my way, however. He does the structure and first draft of the scenes and then we hash them over and finally I type up the finished version and correct the dialogue and so forth. We are now on the final scenes.

I confess I'll be glad when it's over. The weather has been so nasty that I don't have Felicio, the most obliging Puerto Rican bellboy, push my wheel chair out on any more shopping trips. I don't feel so safe in this big town, either. Somebody doesn't want this film released—I've had some threatening phone calls and so has Mr. Abbas and Gary Twill.

And I tell you, dear, I can almost smell Death around this hotel—close to me and coming closer. When I tell my fortune with the cards, I get the Queen of Spades or some other dismal symbol almost every time—and you know what that means!

I rescued a lost forlorn black kitten in an alleyway and sneaked it into the hotel—you know black cats are lucky! I named him Asmodeus, and I intend to bring him back with me and present him to our darlings.

If I ever come back! Marcia, I have a terrible presentiment that Death hovers over this old hotel—I mean it! Just as soon as the TV script is finished and approved by Mr. Abbas—a very strange man, but you know producers, almost always the enemies of talent—and as soon as the picture is completely cast and costumes picked, I am getting out of here. Maybe I'll come back when they actually start shooting and maybe I won't. This Lilith Lawrence who is to play me looks the part all right—she is beautiful enough—but she underacts terribly. I hate to say it about anybody but I fear she's a Method actress!

Must close now—room service will be bringing up my dinner and I have to lock Asmodeus in the closet as the little black devil will dash out through any open door and then I have to chase him, in my wheel chair, yet—unless Felicio or Gary Twill is around to help.

Don't worry about what I said—at my age Death is only a heartbeat away anyhow. And I know how to protect myself. I have a very authentic-looking pistol that shoots ammonia, plus some other precautions, like a chain on the door.

Kiss the dear kiddies for me.
Your affectionate

Auntie Cecily

The Inspector handed back the letter and shrugged. "Sounds like some kind of a nut," he observed. "And I thought black cats were supposed to be *unlucky*."

"I am not interested in primitive superstitions, Oscar. During the Dark Ages in Europe—and even in England during the witchcraft hunts—hundreds of thousands of cats were tortured and killed because they were thought to be witches' familiars, and rats and mice overran the land. How any cats survived I'll never know, but I prefer dogs myself, particularly big Standard poodles like my dear old Talley, who is languishing in a boarding kennel at the moment."

The Inspector looked at his watch pointedly.

"Very well, Oscar, we'll get down to cases. Perhaps Cecily is a bit of a psychic, or has some ESP precognition power. Coming events do cast their shadows before: Abraham Lincoln foresaw his own death in a dream, and the day before President Kennedy was assassinated a clairvoyant ran all over Washington trying to get to somebody and warn him not to go to Dallas."

"Coincidence," said Oscar Piper.

"Perhaps. But suppose somebody actually *doesn't* want

Cecily's life story to come out—somebody who knew her 'way back when and has since, shall we say, reformed and hoped that the wild oats would stay buried?"

"Come off it! The old dame is strictly a has-been! Who cares about scandals that happened more than forty years ago? It's ancient history. And how would knocking off the writer—or Cecily either—prevent Mr. Abbas from making the picture anyway?"

"I don't know—yet! But I have all the newspaper clippings here in my handbag. There is something rotten, and I don't mean in Denmark. I'm not just working on a hunch, or on my so-called feminine intuition either. Oscar, how deeply have you looked into this Gary Twill death?"

"Things have changed in the Police Department, Hildegard. I'm strictly administrative now, and other men on precinct level do the legwork. I'm supposed to be an Inspector."

"Well, then—*inspect!*"

"Hildy, why are you getting the wind up and making all these waves?"

"I'll tell you exactly why. I only got into town this morning—I tried to phone you from the airport and got a fast brushoff from that uniformed ape in your outer office. He

told me you were in conference!" She sniffed. "You were not to be disturbed!"

"That's right, I was down having a look at the morning lineup."

"I got another brushoff at the Hotel Harlow Towers, where Cecily Barth is too tied up to see anybody, and so on. But I had noticed that Gary Twill, the man you say committed suicide, was reported by hotel employees to have gone out on a brief errand shortly before he died. He returned with a paper bag which he took up to his room. Right?"

"According to these reports, right. But it all fits. He thought he needed some Dutch courage—"

"I do wish, Oscar, you would stop insulting the people of Holland. And why should Gary Twill go out in the rain? Why buy liquor himself when he could have called room service and had drinks sent up from the bar and charged to Mr. Abbas? Or at least sent a bellboy out on his errand? It just doesn't fit! So having nothing better to do, I provided myself with a newspaper photograph of Twill—who, I must say, was a distinctive-looking man well over six feet, with prematurely white hair—and I went out cruising the neighbor-

hood shops to see if I could discover the *real* purpose of his last errand." She paused dramatically.

"And so what?"

"So *this!* He not only bought a bottle of champagne at a package store on Sixth Avenue, but he also stopped in at a travel agency on Fifth and purchased a first-class airplane ticket to Los Angeles on the 11:00 p.m. flight! Now, don't tell me that a man who intends to die the hard way would go out and spend almost \$200 on a plane ticket that he didn't intend to use!"

The Inspector frowned. "Then something must have happened to push him over the edge—"

"Exactly! Something—or someone."

"I mean, to make him change his mind." But Oscar Piper was not quite as sure as he had been a few moments before.

"These are deep waters, Oscar. And getting deeper. If we could only look back in Time, and see Yesterday..."

It was late morning on a rainy Wednesday. Or a rainy morning on a late Wednesday. Gary Twill wasn't quite sure and didn't care which. He opened his bloodshot eyes somewhat gingerly, to survey

the ceiling of his hotel room, wishing fervently that he were far, far away from this dingy pad, far from the darling if slightly demented old bat of a Cecily—he sometimes thought of her as "Nightmare Alice"—in the next suite, far from Boris Abbas in his office up in the penthouse furnished in silver and black upholstery, and most particularly far from Janey Roberts, Valkyrie-cum-vixen.

Far from Manhattan. The big city, to a native Californian, always seemed dirty, raw, and cold—when it wasn't dirty, hot, and humid. Twill had worked almost all night on the final sequence of *The Thousand and One Loves of Cecily Barth*—a title he loathed, but maybe he could talk Abbas into changing it later. He had turned the final ten pages over to Cecily for her to read and approve and type up the final version with two carbons; it kept her feeling that she was a part of it all to bang it out on her portable electric typewriter, and she could do nice clean copy. She was to take it up to Abbas, or at least leave it with Janey for the great man to read later. Anyway, the damn thing was done, *finis*, complete.

What a wild assignment! What a wild collaboration, with this crazy old relic who fancied herself as a writer because she'd

taken some correspondence course in screenwriting and had turned out a dozen or so dramas that never even got to first base with movie or TV story editors! But today not even a former Oscar winner could pick and choose his assignments; there was eighty percent unemployment in the Writers Guild West.

The big man sat up in his tangled blankets and sighed, ruffling his almost white but still very curly locks. Then he fumbled for the phone and called down to room service for breakfast—not that his stomach was really awake yet.

After a while the ubiquitous Felicio rolled in a cart bearing a pot of coffee, orange juice, some cold toast and obviously colder eggs. Felicio also wore his hopeful Puerto Rican smile, beneath the nose which had been flattened during some earlier attempts to become the terror of the welterweights—but you had to give the guy credit for trying.

Sometimes he was very trying, like now. For he had another manuscript with him; Twill could see it sticking out of a pocket. The Great American short story again. “Oh, God!” moaned the man in the bed. “Not today!”

“But you have feenish the job. You will go back soon to

Hollywood. You take my manuscript and show it to Mr. Goldwyn like you promise?”

“Yes, yes. Just leave it on the bureau.”

Gary Twill might just as well have said “wastebasket”—and the hypersensitive Felicio sensed it immediately. He withdrew into his Latin sheath, with injured dignity. “I guess it was all just kidding, no?” There was a sentence or two in mumbled Spanish, too fast for Gary Twill to catch—except for one or two words, and those not customarily found in Spanish-English tourist dictionaries. The door closed behind Felicio, and none too gently.

Twill sighed and shrugged. These would-be authors! He really should not have jollied Felicio along—now he’d probably made another enemy in this God-forsaken place. Twill drank the orange juice and a few sips of the cold coffee, then went back to a troubled sleep, from which he was rudely awakened around 2:00 p.m. by the sound of a key in the door and the entrance of a somewhat oversize but very blonde and very curvaceous young woman whose secret Mona Lisa smile boded no particular good.

She had been here many times before, under happier circumstances. It was obvious that at this moment she was not

on loving dalliance bent, to put it mildly. "You could have knocked, Janey dear," he said, as he drew a sheet over the bare and exposed portions of his muscular figure:

"I could have knocked with a hammer on your thick skull, buster," said Jane. "With joy and gusto. But as it happens I just dropped by to return your room key, and to be the first to bring you some good news. Good from my point of view at least. Not from yours."

"Don't be unkind when I have a king-size hangover. What happened? Didn't Cecily approve the script! She's already okayed all but the last ten pages."

"Oh, she typed up the last scene real neat, and she said she approved the whole thing. She'd do anything for you, Lover Boy, like most women. But when His Nibs read your hunk of tripe—"

"Rewrite required?" asked Gary Twill, moaning.

"Rewrite my sainted painted toenails! Mr. Abbas read it and then he blew up and he said—and I quote—that it is the most misbegotten, unshootable, useless one hundred and eighty pages of junk that he has ever seen, even in a lifetime involved with writers who can't write, and that it turns out to be sophomoric fantasy instead of

the objective semi-documentary biography he hired you to do, and that if he could he'd hold up your check and that he fervently wished someone would restrain him from coming down here and strangling you with his bare hands for wasting over four grand of his hard-earned money and then delivering a package of pure garbage!"

Jane was enjoying this, Gary Twill suddenly discovered. She was trying to get a bit of her own back, as our British cousins say. But he was now fairly wide-awake. "Come now; what was so wrong with the damn script?"

"You ought to know! You fictionized the whole thing!"

"Suddenly I feel confused—I didn't think it was fiction. But dear sweet love, knock it off! So what if Abbas puts another writer on the final, shooting version of the script? Forgive and forget; come back to Hollywood with me and live it up a little! We fit together so good—you make me happy!"

"Slap-happy," said Jane. "Mister Twill, I wouldn't go to Hollywood with you if by any chance I wanted to go to Hollywood and you were the accredited, uniformed driver of a brand-new Greyhound bus! I don't mess around with a guy who's already had three wives!"

"Two, and both legally divorced. I only pay token alimony." He sighed, the handsome if slightly raddled face looking hurt. "You shouldn't insist on taking it so seriously. I should have told you in the beginning, I know. But please, baby—I got a headache. I worked all night. Everybody hates me. Cecily thinks I didn't do her amours full justice, now you say Abbas isn't satisfied with the script, and Felicio hates me because I don't flip over his short stories cribbed from O. Henry—"

"And don't forget Lilith Lawrence, buster!"

"Lilith? Hell, she got the part, didn't she? She's set to play Cecily, thanks to me."

"And you soft-talked her into testing for the role on the Beautyrest, which got her into trouble with her agent who happens also to be her boy friend, a guy even bigger than you are and considerably stronger if not meaner, by the name of Hymie Rose. Keep out of dark alleys, darling, while you're still in Manhattan."

"You *do* give a damn, then, Janey, darling!" Gary Twill said hopefully.

"Not for you, for Hymie. He might just possibly get caught, though it would be justifiable homicide in my book, you—you rat-fink!" Jane went out,

slamming the door behind her.

Twill winced and then slid out of bed, stark naked. He paused to take a medicinal gulp from the almost-empty bottle of whiskey on the bureau and then—when the warm glow had hit his insides to a satisfactory degree—set about showering, shaving, and putting on some clothes. He'd phone Abbas pretty soon and find out how much Janey, in her vicious, holier-than-thou mood, had exaggerated the foul-up with the script. Probably she had exaggerated quite a lot, because while it wasn't going to be nominated for an Emmy it was still a damn good piece of work, considering what there had been to work with. Cecily's life story almost outstripped *Fanny Hill* and *Forever Amber* combined.

When Gary Twill was half dressed he stopped short, sniffing. There was a strange smell in the air. It wasn't Janey's too liberal sprinkling of "My Sin," or the breakfast eggs, or Cecily's damn cat that had its litter box in the otherwise unused connecting bathroom; it was something else—something Gary couldn't identify.

"New York just smells, I guess," he said to himself. "Too many people too close together." Being an essentially factual and objective man, he

did not once consider the odor to be the smell of death, nor did he—for all his sensitivity—hear the beating of dark, invisible wings overhead.

"Here goes," he said aloud, and finished the bottle. Then he mentally girded his loins, put on his armor, and went down the hall and up the elevator to the penthouse. Abbas had both his offices and his living quarters here, plus a tiny and somewhat bedraggled patio and garden outside, forty stories above the street.

Miss Bixby, the built-in receptionist, was a dour old doll, a sort of birdlike old biddy from whom he had never even been able to win a smile. Not at least until this afternoon, when she told Gary Twill that the great man was much too busy to see him, and that his severance check would be mailed to his agent. Gary Twill ruefully chalked up another sworn enemy, but he headed for the inner door.

It was locked. "He's got Miss Lawrence and her agent in there now," proffered Miss Bixby. "And I don't think waiting around will do you any good, frankly. Jane distinctly said that I was to tell you not to wait."

But Gary Twill waited anyway, reading an old magazine from the coffee table

without actually seeing it. After a while the inner door opened and Lilith Lawrence—the spitting image of Cecily Barth at 25, even to the dark sleek hair and the billowy hips—emerged, closely followed by her agent. Hymie was a robust, sharply dressed man with close-shaved but darkish-blue chin and cheeks, who looked straight through Gary Twill and headed for the exit. Lilith Lawrence (born Mae Klotz) hesitated for a moment, giving the writer her sweetest smile.

"So sorry, Gary darling," she trilled. "But that's the way the ball bounces, isn't it? I only—" Hymie Rose grasped her by the elbow and propelled her hastily out of the place.

"So now can I see Abbas?" Twill demanded of the woman at the desk.

She shrugged and picked up the phone. After a moment she put it down and said, "Mr. Abbas says to tell you that he's very busy and that your room rent is paid up only through today and that if you keep hanging around and bothering him I am to call Mr. Durkin, who as you know is the house detective, and have you forcibly eeejected!"

"I get the message," said Gary Twill. "Have a good time at the next coven." He departed, with whatever dignity

was left to him. Which was not too much.

As he rode down in the elevator he decided to travel westward under the alias of George Spelvin or something; no use letting everybody in the trade who read *Daily Variety* and its "NY to LA and LA to NY" column know that screen-writer Gary Twill had flopped in the big city and was returning ahead of time with his tail between his legs . . .

In Inspector Piper's office Miss Hildegard Withers was holding forth. "But don't you see, Oscar, this man Twill was out of his element here in New York. He was surrounded by people he didn't understand and who didn't understand him. This independent producer, Mr. Abbas, is reputed throughout show business to be a man of violent temper. According to the newspaper accounts, in his earlier days he was a professional wrestler in Hungary and a protégé of Sandor Szabo, whoever that was—"

"Just one of the greatest mat men in history," said Piper, brightening.

"You see? If he became enraged at his writer—?"

"Hildegard, you're tilting at windstorms."

"It's *windmills*, if you insist on quoting from books you've

never read! Abbas is a possibility, anyway. He had the physical ability to throw anybody through a window or over a parapet. And then there is this Jane Roberts person, the blonde Amazon type. With whom Gary Twill was for a time intimate, to put it politely. A woman scorned, Oscar—you know how dangerous they are."

"Dream on, dream on. In this day and age women don't kill for that, not good-looking ones, anyway."

The spinster schoolteacher was consulting her sheaf of newspaper clippings. "Then what about Lilith Lawrence, the girl chosen to play the part of the young Cecily in the TV film? Here's a nightclub photo of her and Gary Twill, holding hands at someplace called El Morocco and looking very fatuously at one another. A girl as physically equipped as Lilith must have plenty of boy friends, some of whom might have resented a Hollywood writer getting into the act, as the phrase goes. An obvious jealousy motive. And there is also the unpleasant Mr. Durkin, the house detective, who was very nasty to me this morning when I tried to see Cecily. According to the newspaper stories he had had several altercations with Twill over noise and high jinks in the hotel

room. He's a suspect to be reckoned with."

"He's also an ex-cop," Piper said. "I remember vaguely that there was some beef connected with his leaving the Force. That I will look into, if you insist. But don't let me stop you—go on with your brain-washing."

"I think you mean brain-storming, but no matter. You're a real Mr. Malaprop, Oscar. There is also this bellboy named Felicio Bonaventura, who keeps cropping up in the affair and who seems to have told each reporter a different story. Anyway, not one of these people has an airtight alibi for the time of the murder—if it was, as I believe, a murder."

"But do they *need* alibis? And while you're making up your list, better put down dear old Cecily Barth, too. I don't see any motive for her—but you never know. And the wheel chair can be only a prop, and she can really walk as good as anybody else—"

"As *well*, Oscar! And I think you have been watching too many old movies on the Late Late Show. Even if it weren't for her crippling arthritis, even if she could get out of the wheel chair and walk, how on earth could she—a frail woman weighing less than a hundred pounds—throw a big man out of a window?"

"It's your frammis," said Oscar Piper. "Personally, I think it was the butler. Only I guess there really isn't any butler in our cast of characters, is there?"

"You're not being very funny. And you haven't explained the bottle of champagne or the airline ticket. I think the ticket alone proves that my worst suspicions are justified."

"Do you ever have any *best* suspicions?" He grinned, and chose a fresh cigar. "Hildegarde, I'm very fond of you, but sometimes you're nuttier than a fruit cake."

"In case you don't know it, there are some new recipes for fruit cake. Remember, Oscar, that Cecily Barth did step on a lot of toes in her heyday, and no doubt she made a lot of enemies. In her time as a movie queen she was, according to legend, no better than she should be, leading men on and then throwing them aside—"

"Like a worn-out glove?"

"—and wrecking many a marriage and many a career. Her life story, if presented on television, might just possibly ruin certain people who have since grown mature and respectable. Suppose for a moment that she, and not Gary Twill at all, was the intended victim? Remember Cecily's letter to her

niece? Suppose Gary Twill had been trying to protect her, and somehow got too close to the truth?"

"My supposer isn't quite that active nowadays, Hildegard. But let's look at this thing seriously for a moment. It just *has* to be suicide. Twill was a big, powerful, athletic-type man and nobody could have thrown or pushed him out of a hotel window, not without a hell of a lot of commotion anyway."

"Unless he was knocked unconscious first, perhaps?"

"You're *reaching*, Hildegard. No, I have a hunch he took the easy way out."

"Suicide is 'easy'?" she snapped. "That could only be suggested by someone who has never experienced it. Oh, you know what I mean! And my dear Oscar, time was when if I came into your office with a bee in my bonnet, you'd have come instantly alive, grabbed your hat and a handful of those dreadful stogies, and we'd have taken off on the chase."

"Time *was*," admitted the Inspector soberly. "I'm strictly desk level now; I don't actually go out on cases and try to do the work of the precinct men. And remember, neither of us is as young as we used to be."

"Speak for yourself, Oscar!" And Miss Withers gathered

herself and her belongings together and made an abrupt exit, slamming the door so hard that, out in the anteroom, the sergeant swallowed his gum.

Thirty seconds later the sergeant had another shock, as he saw the skipper erupt from the inner office, hat and topcoat and cigars in hand. "Closed for the day," Inspector Oscar Piper barked in passing. "Hold the fort. I got to take off and try to keep my best friend from becoming her own worst enemy." He hurried out into the main hallway—where he found Miss Hildegard Withers leaning against the bulletin board with a patient yet cryptic smile on her somewhat equine visage.

"So here we go again," she said. "Better late than never."

A little later the two oddly assorted sleuths climbed out of a taxi at the Hotel Harlow Towers, that once plush and now slightly run-down hostelry on Central Park South. They stood on the sidewalk, a chill autumnal wind whipping about their ankles, at presumably the same spot where Gary Twill had come plummeting down out of nowhere to splash his brains out on the cement. Just before 6:00 p.m. would have been a very busy hour at this location, as they both knew.

"It was only by the grace of God that the fool didn't take some innocent passerby with him on his trip to the Hereafter," observed Oscar Piper. "As it was—according to the reports—three people were knocked down, and one woman had to be hospitalized."

"Another argument against suicide," pointed out the retired schoolteacher. "Unless Gary Twill had no compassion."

Unfortunately there had been no actual eyewitnesses. If Twill had stood for a few moments in the window, or had hesitated on the narrow ledge outside while he screwed up his courage, nobody had seen him. It had all happened during one of Manhattan's sudden, blustering rainstorms. With no buildings across the street, nothing there except the reaches of a practically deserted Central Park, no one had been in position to catch an accidental glimpse of the beginning of the high dive—if indeed it had been a voluntary dive. Naturally, all the people in the street below were either shielded by umbrellas or by folded newspapers held over their heads; no eyes had been turned up against the slashing, icy rain.

"The first cruise car got here just two minutes after six," Oscar Piper was patiently

explaining. "The officers took statements from several persons, including one newsboy—"

"Who very probably might be that little man in the kiosk over there," Miss Withers interrupted impatiently. "I wonder!"

For once she wondered correctly. Mr. Herman Gittel, age 56, professional news vendor, proved reasonably amenable to conversation after Miss Withers had purchased one copy of each of his evening newspapers, noting with sadness that the *Herald-Tribune* was gone.

"Sure, I seen it," said Mr. Gittel. "And I heard him yelling all the way down. He sounded real weird, like he was nuts or something. Stuff musta blown out of his pockets, because the air was like a snowstorm with bits of paper."

"I really wish I knew exactly what bits of paper," remarked the schoolteacher wistfully. "But I suppose the street cleaners have done their work." She surveyed the gutter, poking into a storm drain with her umbrella.

"I kept me one sheet as sort of a souvenir," offered Mr. Gittel. And from his well-worn leather jacket he produced a wrinkled, rain-stained piece of manuscript paper—which proved to be Page 172 of what

seemed to be a teleplay script. Miss Withers and the Inspector read:

SCENE 88—EXT COLD-WATER CANYON HOUSE—MED CLOSE SHOT—DAY Cecily and Norman, she in daring and revealing swimsuit, he in smart yachting costume of the time. They are seated on a stone bench with profusion of flowers in B.G. He is concealing displeasure. Cecily is, however, mistress of the situation.

CECILY (moving closer)

Don't be difficult, Normie-pie. Isn't it enough to be my lover—do you have to be my leading man, too? It really isn't your type of role anyway, Mr. Lasky says. And when *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* is released, you can write your own ticket at Essanay or anywhere.

NORMAN

It isn't just that, beautiful. You're a lovely cheat. We were supposed to have a date to go down to Ensenada and gamble a little over the weekend—you broke it because you had to stay home and read the script of *Passion's Pawn* or something, and then you were seen dancing at the Miramar with somebody whose name I intentionally don't remember.

CECILY

Don't be difficult, darling. You

have your career and I have mine. Let's leave it that way.

The rest was undecipherable. Which, Miss Withers thought, might be all for the best. "Oscar," she said on impulse, "will you buy this for me?"

Somewhat reluctantly, the Inspector invested two dollars for the tattered souvenir.

"So the guy took his rejected manuscript with him," he said. "You getting morbid or something, collecting mementoes yet?"

"One never knows," the schoolteacher pronounced mysteriously.

"Anyway," Oscar Piper pointed out impatiently, "whatever personal stuff blew out of his pockets on the way down, his billfold was there and he was immediately identified."

"Did the airline ticket show up?"

"Not according to the report. Somebody probably found it and cashed it in. But he had a California driver's license, membership cards in the Writers Guild West, Greater Los Angeles Press Club, Ace Hudkins Health Club and Gym, Civil Liberties Union, and NAACP and CORE, and the usual jumble of credit cards. There was also over \$300 in currency, and his room key tagged Hotel Harlow Towers

2466. Our men went right in and upstairs and reported that 2466, a single, was something of a shambles. Bed unmade, a litter of coffee cups and empty liquor bottles, and manuscript pages scattered all over the floor. The room was sealed off, but if you insist on taking a gander at it—"

Miss Withers had been vainly trying to count up to the windows of the 24th floor, but had only managed to get a crick in her neck. "If you count the lobby and presumably the mezzanine, and skip the thirteenth floor which no hotel ever has, then—" She sighed, and gave it up.

"It was the twenty-fourth all right," put in the cooperative Mr. Gittel. "I seen the open windows."

"Saw," corrected the schoolteacher absently. "But are you sure?"

"The hotel is forty stories, and I counted down to where I saw the open windows—"

"Windows? *Plural*?"

"Well, the one on the left was wide-open, curtains flying, and the second over to the right was just a little open. Before the cops got here it was closed."

"Very interesting," said the schoolteacher.

Inspector Oscar Piper found it less so. "Well," he grumbled,

"there doesn't seem to be any question about the guy going out the window of his own room. I suppose you're hell-bent to go up to the pad and have a look for clues; but Hildegard, I warn you, those were trained investigators who handled this case, working on modern scientific lines."

"And using computers, no doubt!" she said scornfully.

"Computers don't guess, like you do! Well, do we go upstairs?"

Miss Withers was deep in thought. "I suppose so. But I am more interested in *people* than in the scene of the crime. I want to see Cecily Barth and make sure that the poor crippled old woman isn't the victim of another 'accidental' suicide or something, and I want to meet the various people who had reasons, large or small, for disliking Gary Twill."

"Okay," said the Inspector resignedly. "Let's go."

They entered the ornate but somewhat musty lobby of the old hotel, almost but not quite a relic of the Gaslight Era, and immediately learned from a supercilious desk clerk that Miss Barth wasn't seeing anybody or taking calls, and furthermore—

"Who's your house dick?" demanded Oscar Piper.

"Why—our security officer is Mr. Durkin, but—"

"Get him here, fast." For once the schoolteacher had to admit the usefulness of a shiny gold badge (denoting over 30 years with the Department) which the Inspector flashed briefly. Because wheels turned, and Mr. Durkin (who had given her a sort of bum's rush earlier in the day) made an instant appearance from the restaurant-bar, where he must have been enjoying a very late lunch or a very early dinner for he was sucking his teeth and chewing chlorophyll mints.

"Was there something, Inspector?"

"There was and is."

The stubby, choleric house detective lost no time getting into the record that he was very shocked that a thing like this should have occurred at a quiet, respectable hotel like the Harlow Towers but what can you do? A suicide is a suicide, and the least said about it, the better. And after all, this Twill twerp wasn't the sort of guest who would have been made welcome at the hotel, only he was working for Mr. Abbas, a long-time resident of the penthouse and anything Mr. Abbas asks for—

"Okay. Abbas took a room here for his imported Hollywood writer, and a suite next door for Cecily Barth—is that right?" The Inspector was

getting more than a little impatient, perhaps because he had a light lunch and was thinking of dinner. "Anybody else?"

"Just Miss Lawrence, the star. She's in 2634. There's a reservation for the director when they pick one, and for the casting director and costumer. Mr. Abbas likes to have all his staff right on hand. Only his secretary, Jane Roberts, lives home—I think in Brooklyn Heights. And Miss Bixby, the receptionist, who doesn't really count. I'll be glad to take you upstairs—"

"You better be," said the Inspector. "You know, Mr. Durkin, I seem to remember something. You were a sergeant, working out in Queens or Staten Island or somewhere. There was a mishmash, and you were allowed to resign rather than stand charges. So you went out to California and didn't make out and then you came back to Manhattan and got this job."

They were going up in a rocky old elevator. "Can you cool it, Inspector?" Durkin was sweating. "I need this job, and what's past is past. You know how it is, Inspector."

"Maybe," said Oscar Piper. "We'll see how it plays. Where's the room the guy jumped out the window of?"

Durkin led the way down a long hall and then to the right, past a door which he pointed out as Miss Barth's. Then they came to Gary Twill's door. "It's been sealed," said the house detective.

"Then I'll just unseal it," said Oscar Piper.

They went into the room, Miss Withers entering with some trepidation for the place was—from her point of view—in a mess. The bed looked as if some insomniac hippopotamus had been in it, the desk and surrounding territory were littered with pages of crumpled manuscript, the bureau bore an empty whiskey bottle, and clothes were strewn everywhere.

"Yet he seems to have died," the schoolteacher pointed out, "rather nattily dressed in tweed jacket and slacks, including a necktie. Suicides usually don't care how they look. I think I have 'cased the joint,' as you would say. Let us go."

"Okay, okay," said the weary Inspector as he resealed the door. "So now you're satisfied?"

"Not at all! There were no signs of a fight or struggle, no broken furniture or other indications of combat. Yet still—"

"So it was suicide!"

"With the airline ticket?"

The schoolteacher shook her head. Then she turned suddenly on the house detective. "Mr. Durkin, just why did you intimate that Gary Twill wasn't the type of guest welcomed at the sacrosanct Harlow Towers?"

Durkin said uneasily, "Well, he was a sort of Bohemian type—loud stereo music at all hours, hipped on the liberal bit and fraternizing with the help and giving 'em ideas. He had Felicio all steamed up about becoming a writer. And he had all sorts of people visiting his room. We can't have that sort of thing."

"Dear me, no! We must live in the last century, mustn't we?" Her glance was scathing.

"Okay, okay!" put in the Inspector. "Let's go see the movie queen."

"Miss Barth isn't going to let us in," predicted Durkin. "Since this happened she's been locked in tight, and she won't hardly even let the maids in to do her rooms."

"No room service? How does she eat?" asked Piper sensibly.

"Didn't you know? Miss Barth is a vegetarian, and lives mostly on wheat germ and crackers and stuff like that, all out of cans and boxes." They were now standing outside the door of the suite, and Durkin knocked. He knocked again

and then called out in a wheedling tone, "It's just Durkin, Miss Barth. Can we see you for a minute?"

There was not the slightest sound from within. Inspector Oscar Piper, who was not the most patient man in the world, saw a bell and leaned on it. "Open up, lady—this is the police!"

"Go away!" came a querulous voice from within. "You're not fooling me with that old one!"

Oscar Piper sighed, and nodded at the house dick—who reluctantly produced his master key. It worked, at first. The door swung open and then held, caught by a heavy chain.

Miss Withers felt that this had been mismanaged enough, and spoke up. "Cecily, will you please listen?" she said in her best classroom voice of authority. "Mr. Durkin and Inspector Piper of the New York Police Department are with me, but I started the whole thing. You may not know me but my name is Hildegard Withers and I happen to live next door to Marcia, out in Santa Monica, and she showed me your letter—"

"Prove it!" The voice was still hostile.

"Well, Marcia is on a new diet and has lost three pounds. John is working the swing shift

at Douglas. Loramae had summer flu but got over it and she and her brothers are now trampling my flowerbeds again. Is that enough?"

"All right, I guess," came the disembodied voice. The door closed, a chain rattled free, and then they were permitted inside—all but Mr. Durkin, who found his way blocked by the Inspector's right arm.

"Look, I got my job to do," complained Durkin. "I got to tell her we got rules about not installing chains and keeping pets and—"

"Blow," said Oscar Piper, with the disdain of an honest cop for one who had cheated. Mr. Durkin blew.

And Miss Withers and the Inspector were entering a big, dimly lighted drawing room that smelled of perfume and cat and cigarette smoke. The schoolteacher had eyes only for the woman in the lightweight wheel chair who faced them, sitting on it grandly as if it were some sort of throne. She wore a flowered housecoat as if it were ermine and velvet, and her chin was high and defiant.

What was left of Cecily Barth, presumably in her seventies, was mostly spirit and spunk, though there were traces of ruined beauty under the heavy makeup and in her deep dark eyes. And her hair was still

as raven-black and as sleekly arranged as it had been back in the halcyon days when this woman had rivaled Theda Bara and Nita Naldi and Clara Kimball Young . .

"It was so good of you to come," Cecily was saying, holding out her hand. "You must forgive my seeming rudeness at the door. But my nerves are in a dither. However, any friend of dear Marcia's—"

Her words were for Miss Withers, but her attention was turned to Oscar Piper; he was a man. For a few seconds she was a faint echo of the Screen Vamp, the Sex Goddess of the Silver Screen, unquote. Quite evidently she expected the Inspector to kiss her hand, but he only held it for a second and then sheepishly dropped it.

Meanwhile Miss Withers was gathering impressions, as was her habit. This elderly, crippled old woman was in fear of her life; the schoolteacher could almost feel the fear, could almost smell it above Cecily's perfume.

"You must excuse the way the place looks," Cecily was saying, waving her hand vaguely. Indeed, the room was a jumble of untidiness. The tables, chairs, and even the mantlepiece suggested Christmas Eve in the family of a dozen or more small children:

everything was piled high with toys, plus rolls of fancy wrappings, balls of vari-colored string, and boxes of bright Santa Claus stickers. There was a stack of packages, wrapped and ready for mailing, in one corner.

"Christmas—in September?" said the Inspector, unbelieving.

"I'm afraid I went simply mad in your New York toy stores," admitted Cecily as she made ineffectual efforts to find them a place to sit. "I had such fun shopping before—before I got too scared to go out any more, even with dear Felicio pushing my wheel chair. But now, I really don't trust anybody!"

The Inspector was seated uneasily on the edge of a sofa and had taken out a fresh cigar, while Miss Withers prowled the room, the packages, the typewriter table. There were many scrapbooks, many old newsclips and photos of an earlier era. But what she was interested in was *now*.

"About this suicide next door—" the Inspector began.

"If indeed it *was* suicide," said Cecily Barth meaningfully.

"You didn't hear any sounds of a struggle, any raised voices?"

"No," admitted Cecily. "But there is an unused bathroom between, where I keep my cat's

litterbox. Mr. Twill and I were working very closely together on the script, and we never locked the connecting doors. That would have made a fine scandal once upon a time, wouldn't it? But I'm afraid I wasn't here to notice anything yesterday afternoon; my cat had got out and down the hall and I was looking for him, as I often have to do when I can't get anybody to do it for me."

"Let's get down to cases," the Inspector went on firmly. "When did you last see Gary Twill?"

"Well, he brought in the last sequence of the script early in the morning, around eight o'clock. He'd worked on it all night, poor dear boy. Like most writers, he hated to make carbons and he always made a lot of typographic errors, so I had to type the final version of everything."

Cecily nodded toward the corner of the room, where they saw a bridge table, a portable electric typewriter similar to the one used by Gary Twill, and several piles of white and yellow paper.

"It wasn't actually as intimate and deep a collaboration as I had hoped it would be, but I'm still going to try for co-screenplay credit. The lovely TV residuals, you know! That's the payment to writers for

re-runs, and it can go on for years." She beamed at them. "A sensational life story like mine will be released and re-released over and over again."

"You were satisfied with the script, then?" asked Miss Withers.

"More than satisfied! Gary had caught the spirit of the really great days of Hollywood. Such a dear brilliant man! I can't believe he took his own life."

"Who would have done it, then?" demanded Oscar Piper.

"Really, my dear man!" Cecily made a dramatic gesture. "How on earth should I know? I'm a stranger in town."

"I a stranger and afraid, in a world I never made," said Miss Withers softly. Cecily was obviously winding the Inspector around her little finger, with a practiced charm that dated back two generations. The schoolteacher was less easily impressed. "You're quite sure you heard nothing in the next room yesterday afternoon, and that you were out chasing your kitten at the time Gary Twill died?"

"Quite sure."

"And you received Twill's version of the last sequence of the script about eight yesterday morning, and retyped it with carbons and then took it up to

Mr. Abbas say around ten or ten thirty?"

"Exactly. Only I gave it to Jane, his confidential secretary. I can manage these automatic elevators very well, if I take my time. I told Jane that I was delighted with the script and that I would sign formal approval anytime—I have that right in my contract."

"And did you hear anything from Mr. Abbas yesterday?"

"Nothing directly. I phoned Jane Roberts sometime after lunch to learn what the great man's verdict was, and she said he was still studying the script but that storm warnings were out. That didn't worry me; he's the sort of producer who never likes anything on paper in the first reading."

She broke off when there was a sudden interruption from the bedroom. What erupted was at first sight a rather furious battle between two small black kittens. The fracas moved into the drawing room—and then it turned out to be a mimic battle between one black kitten, and one very naturalistic toy kitten, with the former naturally getting the upper hand—or upper paw. Then just as suddenly it was all over; the live kitten turned its back on the stuffed kitten-on-a-string, stalked over to Cecily, and leaped lightly into her lap.

"Asmodeus baby!" said Cecily Barth. She turned to her visitors. "I almost named him Lucifer—only then his nickname would have been 'Loose,' and I couldn't have that, could I?"

"We'll wait and see the film," said Miss Withers ironically, conscious that they weren't getting anywhere. "Miss Barth, I moved heaven and earth to get the Inspector to come up here with me and look into this affair, and all because of Marcia. But I don't think you're being altogether frank with us. We happen to know that you saw Gary Twill die. So you weren't chasing your kitten—you were looking out of your open window. A news vendor in the street below looked up and saw two open windows—and then yours was swiftly closed. Right?"

If the sally was supposed to put Cecily into one of her dithers, it failed completely. "I wasn't going to admit that," the aged screen star said. "I just wanted to keep out of it. Yes, I had recovered Asmodeus, and I was sitting here and I heard the commotion. I did rush to the window and it was raining so hard I had to raise it to see anything—and I wish I hadn't."

She faced them defiantly, like an angry child caught with a hand in the cookie jar. But

Miss Withers was thinking. This ridiculous old woman knew something which she was not prepared to disclose. It might be important, it might be minor. But it was something.

"What I am really interested in," said the schoolteacher, "is the bottle of champagne. The one Gary Twill went out to buy shortly before his death. But he didn't drink it as a sort of stirrup cup into Eternity, because the empty bottle wasn't found among the other empties. Can you help us there, Miss Barth?"

Cecily hesitated for a very long second, and then she smiled. "I thought that some things could be kept private," she said, as she put the black kitten gently down out of her lap. "All right, since you press me, I'll tell you."

She wheeled herself over to the hall closet and almost immediately reappeared with an unopened, gold-topped bottle of champagne in her hand. It was, Miss Withers noticed, of 1938 vintage—whether a good year or a bad year she didn't know. But that did not matter.

"A going-away present," Cecily explained. "Just like Gary."

"But no note with it?" pressed Miss Withers. "I know writers."

Cecily hesitated. "I don't

know just when Gary left the bottle. It was in the connecting bathroom, just inside the door on my side. And since you make such a point of it—yes, there *was* a note."

Wheeling herself with a certain calculated dexterity, Cecily went over to the typewriter table and came back with a sheet of manuscript paper, which the Inspector and Miss Withers read as one.

"Cecily dear, the hell with everything. I am taking it on the lam (as we used to say in the old Cagney pictures) and getting outa here. Don't say it hasn't been fun, because it hasn't. Drink this in good health, and think of me as not one who is dead but just gone far away. (Quote from Elizabeth Barrett Browning, I think.) Anyway, I have had it. Your affectionate collaborator, Gary."

It was the Inspector who spoke first. "Well, Hildegard? You said you would be happier with an eyewitness or a suicide note. You now have the latter. Okay? Let's go somewhere and have dinner."

"Let's not," said Miss Withers, who was in a state of confusion but who had a little red light flashing on and off in the back of her brain. She faced

Cecily. "You have, you know, been withholding evidence and in essence you have been resisting police officers in the performance of their duty and otherwise impeding justice. I am quite sure that Inspector Piper can find some grounds for having you held as a material witness in Women's Jail for a few days—"

"It might be a most interesting experience," said Cecily Barth. "But if he did something foolish like that to me—while Jane Roberts, who is the one person who actually might have had real animosity to Gary, goes free—well, Inspectors have become sergeants overnight. Or even sent to a beat over in Canarsie?"

The dear old lady had claws, it appeared. Longer than those of Asmodeus (named after a minor demon) who now was purring contentedly in a chair. A live prop for an ageless actress who was determined always to be on stage... Cats, Miss Withers had observed, always had means of taking care of themselves.

"I think—" began Miss Withers. And then the telephone rang.

"I'm not supposed to have any phone calls," Cecily pouted. But she wheeled herself over to the instrument. "Yes?" Her voice changed into a dulcet

tone. "Yes, Mr. Abbas?"

The voice at the other end was loud and emphatic; it could be heard across the room. "Cecily, mine darlink, ve got problem. Somebody making stink about that fool Twill. Some old dame who minds other people's business. So ve haf a conference here in de office at eight dis evening, right? All of us! So ve agree on our stories. Hokay?"

"I think I can arrange to be there," said Cecily. She hung up and turned back to her guests. "You perhaps heard," she said. "Mr. Abbas is disturbed at this reopening of the case. So he is calling a conference—"

"We know," said Miss Withers. "Things get more complicated all the time. And my best advice to you is—"

Just then the doorbell rang. Cecily wheeled herself over, put on the chain, then opened. Both Miss Withers and the Inspector caught a glimpse of a frightened girlish face through the crack.

"It's me—Lilith!" came the voice. "Miss Barth, I have to tell you something, but the switchboard girl won't ring you."

"Those were my personal instructions, dear. I—I'm not feeling well and I'm not seeing anybody or talking to—"

"But you don't understand!" the voice from the hall

persisted. "We're all in trouble and the picture is in trouble. This whole thing is going to hell in a handbasket. Somebody is trying to reopen the mess and make out like Gary didn't kill himself! There's some old biddy rampaging around—she has some sort of *in* with the fuzz—and she's here only to try to make trouble. And any more bad publicity might frighten away Mr. Abbas' backers. So if anybody asks you, don't tell them about Gary and me—it was only a night or two anyway and all in the course of show business. Really, it doesn't count!"

"Yes, dearie," said Cecily calmly. "My lips are sealed."

"And another thing," said the voice through the crack in the door. "His Nibs wants us all up in the penthouse at eight tonight, for a sort of council of war. It's an ultimatum. We have to get our stories all straight or this picture isn't ever going to get made!"

"Roger—out and over," said Cecily. She closed the door and turned back to her uninvited guests. "You see what I mean?" she demanded a bit plaintively. "I just don't know how to cope with it all."

"You don't have to cope with it all by yourself, not now," said the schoolteacher. "But these are deep waters, and

I feel there is more here than meets the eye, unquote." She gave the Inspector a signal, and they made their departure—with Asmodeus the black kitten making a determined but vain effort to go out with them.

"Well, Hildegard?" said Oscar Piper as they approached the elevator. "Did you see anything I didn't see? I figure that was a genuine twenty-four-carat suicide note, and—"

"And a genuine, twenty-four-carat plane ticket, don't forget. Oscar, I'm afraid I can't take you up on that dinner invitation, I have other things to do. But I suggest that we both crash Mr. Abbas' party at eight."

"Well—if you say so. In for a nickel, in for a dime. Fine old dramatic tradition—to have all the suspects gathered together in one place, while the great Hawkshaw unravels the mystery. Only, in this case, I don't see any possible motive for murder."

"So then it might be an *impossible* motive," Hildegard retorted. "I am not trying to be cryptic, Oscar. But a little red light is flashing on and off in the back of my head, a warning that perhaps I have missed something. And besides, I have an errand to do—some shopping, as it were."

"Not another hat—when I

was just getting used to this one!"

"No, not a hat. Something more in the line of a toy, but a rather unusual toy." She nodded. "And now, if you will be kind enough to hail me a taxi, I'll be off. We'll meet here again in the lobby at eight o'clock, right?"

"Right or wrong, we'll meet," said the Inspector wearily.

The penthouse apartment-cum-office where the self-admittedly great Mr. Abbas lived and had his being was originally a magnificent (if now a somewhat rundown) center of operations. The drawing-room office, in which he was now having a supposedly secret conference with his employees, protégés, and disciples, was large enough for a tennis court or at least a badminton court; it had been furnished in 1932 Moderne—plenty of glass and everything in black and silver, with sharp angles.

The paintings were early imitations of Picasso, the books were sumptuously leather-bound copies of Mr. Abbas' scripts, the lighting was soft and slightly off-green. Miss Bixby loved it; Jane Roberts wished she had kept her date to go bowling; Lilith Lawrence thought belatedly that she

should have taken up some other line of work. Hymie Rose sat beside his client and was chewing on an enormous but unlighted cigar. He should get me out of here and find me some nightclub bookings, Lilith was thinking.

But a TV picture was a TV picture, with audiences in the millions. One mustn't forget that. And it meant so much to dear old Cecily...

Abbas was speaking, as from the mountaintop. He was directing his diatribe at them all, but looking at Cecily in her wheel chair.

"Ve got troubles," said Mr. Abbas. "Troubles with script and troubles with publicity. Everybody here, including me myself, has goofed. But ve don't got to go on goofing. Don't any of you talk to no more reporters, understand? So vat is it if a fool bellboy suggests that maybe I trun—I trew—Gary Twill over the parapet? The script vas bad, but not dat bad. He musta kill himself, de no-goodnik."

Just then there was a shrill alarm from the doorbell, which Miss Bixby hastily arose to answer. And in came Felicio, smiling apologetically. "Sorry, Mr. Abbas—but he have badge and what am I to do?"

So Inspector Oscar Piper, followed closely by Miss Hilde-

garde Withers, joined the party, though very much uninvited. "As you were!" commanded the Inspector. "At ease! This isn't a pinch, yet." Again he flashed the persuasive badge.

But the situation was obviously strained, and Miss Withers was, so to speak, up in arms. "We are gathered together," she began, "all of those who knew Gary Twill here in Manhattan, to try to find out how and why he died—"

"Everybody but Mr. Durkin," put in Cecily Barth softly. "A very nasty man."

"Thank you," said the schoolteacher. "Which gives me an idea." She winked to the Inspector, who frowned and then caught on. He stepped catlike to the door and threw it open, disclosing the house detective crouching outside.

"Come in and join the party," said Miss Withers. "I had a hunch you wouldn't want to miss this."

"I was only keeping tabs—" began Durkin defensively. Then he came sheepishly in.

"I shall continue," the schoolteacher said firmly. "But this is not a simple matter."

"Understatement of de year," put in Boris Abbas. "I resent—"

"Go ahead and resent," said Oscar Piper. "But shut up when the lady is talking."

"We have the case," continued Miss Withers as if in a classroom, "of an athletic, two-hundred-pound man, in full possession of his faculties, who went to his death out of a hotel window. I discount the theory advanced to Felicio in one press interview that Gary Twill was hurled over the parapet by Mr. Abbas—"

"I do not really mean it—I am a writer of fiction!" cut in the bellboy hastily. "I let the imaginations run wild."

"Because that would have required premeditation and an accomplice down on the twenty-fourth floor to open Twill's window. So I eliminated Mr. Abbas."

The producer bowed.

"But may I see the script which you found so disappointing?" she went on. Abbas nodded to Jane, who got it from the files. As she continued, Miss Withers riffled through the neatly typed pages. "I also had to eliminate Mr. Hymie Rose, who, though he possibly had motive, could hardly have thrown Gary Twill out of the window without creating a battlefield in the room."

"But if poor dear Gary had been sandbagged and was therefore unconscious?" suggested Cecily helpfully.

"He wasn't unconscious—he

screamed all the way down. And pages of a manuscript went flying with him. I have one page of that manuscript which was rescued from the gutter and is still legible, and I note that it doesn't match the corresponding page just handed to me. On page 172, in the version Gary Twill took with him to his death, Cecily is playing a love scene in a garden with another Hollywood star of the time, one Norman Kerry—"

"Dat vas in the original outline!" cut in Abbas.

"And in the final version just given to me the scene is played with the Prince of Wales, no less! And later Cecily romances with Jack Dempsey and Charles Lindbergh and heaven knows who else!"

"Vich is vat makes me so infurious!" yelled Abbas. "How to get releases from such big names?"

"Let me explain," Cecily cooed. "I simply took a few liberties as I typed the final version and livened it up a bit. Who remembers dear Norman today? Now Edward, later King of England—"

"His intimates, I understand, always called him by his real name, which was David," said the schoolteacher pedantically.

"I met him once at a party," Cecily said defensively. She looked like a child who had just

been told there is no Santa Claus.

"To continue," said Miss Withers. "I once liked Mr. Durkin for the killer. He had left the police force under a cloud, and lived for a while in Los Angeles until the heat was off and he could come back and get this sinecure of a job as hotel security officer. If Twill had known him out west and learned of the old scandal, and if Mr. Durkin had been afraid that Twill would talk and cost him this job—"

"You're dreaming, Hildegard," said the Inspector.

"I know. I was clutching at straws. But again we face the problem of why the window was open on a stormy, rainy day, and why there were no signs of a struggle. I had to come to the conclusion that this was not a strong-arm job, to use the vernacular. Even though Jane Roberts here has obviously strong arms—"

"And the only real motive!" Cecily put in gleefully. "You should have heard them quarreling!"

"You bitch!" said sweet Jane, with feeling.

"I must confess that at one time I even considered Miss Barth herself as a suspect," continued Miss Withers, glancing in her direction.

"I wouldn't want to be

ignored!" the old lady said happily. "This is the most exciting thing that's happened to me in years!" She was obviously enjoying every moment of it.

"But it's only in old B-movies that a supposed cripple suddenly arises from a wheel chair and performs deeds of mayhem and murder."

"I really am crippled," Cecily said sadly. "Look at my legs, once the most famous in Hollywood!" She lifted her skirt and displayed pitifully atrophied legs, like pipestems. "So if strong men couldn't have pushed poor dear Gary out of a window, how could poor little me?"

"Exactly. How could you?"

"So that seems to leave only me," spoke up the fair Lilith with some spirit. "But how on earth—"

"You could possibly have called his attention to something down in the street, and then—"

"But *why*? He played fair with me, I got the job. And since we are getting down to cases, I didn't just romance him for the job, I really went for him!" And Lilith gave Hymie Rose a defiant stare.

There was a silence. Then the Inspector coughed and murmured, "Well, Hildegard? Having eliminated everybody,

we come back to suicide."

"Not quite, Oscar. Not with that plane ticket." She turned back to Cecily Barth. "Cecily, you took liberties with Twill's script. Didn't you know he'd scream with rage and insist that Mr. Abbas read the correct version—if he was still around? And that your machinations would all go for nothing?"

Cecily was suddenly quiet.

"It may seem to some of you that this is an insufficient motive for taking a man's life. But the human ego is a strange thing—especially the Hollywood ego. Cecily, you convinced yourself that with Gary Twill out of the way you could talk Mr. Abbas here into using the more sensational version of your life story. True or false?"

The people in the big room were hardly breathing; you could have heard a soap bubble explode.

"Utter nonsense," said Cecily finally, in a small voice. "Granting for a moment what you say about the script, how could I, a ninety-pound cripple, throw a big strong man out of a window?" She finished on a high squeak of triumph.

"To make a long story longer," said Miss Withers almost sadly, "I suggest to you, as they say in British trials, that you worked out a clever and devilish scheme—playing on

Gary Twill's good-hearted willingness to help you search for your kitten who was always getting out. You bought a life-like stuffed black kitten, which could easily have been mistaken for the real thing in a rainstorm, and with a cane or some other implement shoved it out on the ledge that runs beneath your room, the bathroom, and Twill's room. Then you rushed to him and asked him to try to reach out of his window and rescue it."

"Pure fantasy!" said Cecily. "I suppose I was right behind him in my wheel chair and gave him a superhuman shove? What jury would believe that?"

"I'm not quite through," Miss Withers said quietly. "I remembered that for years you've been an ardent worker for the Humane Society and the SPCA and kindred organizations, and that once you tried to lead a protest march against the Chicago stockyards. You had seen how they force cattle into the chutes. So you got an inspiration and you bought this."

From her capacious handbag the schoolma'am produced a Xmas-wrapped parcel, and slowly and dramatically unwrapped it. The article inside looked something like a large flashlight, with no bulb.

"What on earth is that?"

demanded Oscar Piper.

"It's known as a Shock Rod. At the stockyards it's called a cattle goad. Oscar, I don't suppose you would let me demonstrate, with you as the subject? I guarantee that if this instrument is applied to your anatomy you will automatically and involuntarily jump farther than you have ever jumped before."

"No, thanks," said Oscar.

Miss Withers pressed the button, and the Shock Rod buzzed like an angry rattlesnake. "Cecily, now we know why Gary Twill went out the window. And how can you explain why we found this nasty thing among the Christmas toys wrapped up for your grandnieces and grand-nephews?"

"You didn't! You couldn't! I mailed it—" Then the ex-movie star realized what she had said.

Miss Withers and the Inspector had their spaghetti dinner after all, if a bit late. Over the zabaglione he suddenly frowned. "One thing bothers me. Oh, it's not the old woman; she won't stand trial—"

"Psychiatric care?" asked the schoolteacher.

"Some private place, with bars. For the rest of her days. No, I'm wondering how you got

into her suite and found the gadget."

"But I didn't! I hunted all over town until I found a place where you can buy them, and I got some Christmas gift paper like Cecily's and wrapped it,

figuring it would shock her into a confession. Shock treatment can work both ways, Oscar."

He grinned, and lifted his glass of Chianti. "To you, Hildegarde. Long may you wave!"



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Michael Harrison

The Facts in the Case of the Missing Diplomat

another "hitherto unpublished" tale of C. Auguste Dupin

Once again we join the world's first detective, the Chevalier C. Auguste Dupin, and his American confidant and chronicler, and the Prefect of the Parisian police—and this time we have a Dupin story to delight the detectival hearts of all those who have a special fondness for the "miracle problem," the "impossible crime." For in this ingenious tale of pure ratiocination, Dupin is faced with (to use a phrase he himself is partial to) "an excessively odd affair." To wit—Mr. Solon T. Twinberrow (a name to tickle aficionados of Poe), Second Secretary of the United States Legation in Paris in the year 183—, walked out of the Legation's front door, was positively seen to cross the courtyard, was just as positively seen to go through the wicket-gate opening onto the Rue de Grenelle St. Germain—and presto, Mr. Twinberrow vanished!

And only the great Dupin could prevent the dire consequences of a diplomatic scandal of the first magnitude . . .

Detective: C. AUGUSTE DUPIN

66 **I**t is a diplomatic scandal of the first magnitude," said G—, one day in the Autumn of 183—, as he sat by the fire in our little back library, or book-closet, *au troisieme*, No. 33, Rue Dunôt, Faubourg St. Germain. "In the inflammatory atmosphere which exists at present, it is a scandal which might—and conceivably will—lead to something far more tragic than a mere exchange of acrimonious notes."

"It is unthinkable," said I, "that my adopted country and

the country of my birth could contemplate war over so trivial a matter as the disappearance of a minor diplomat!"

"However," murmured my friend, the Chevalier C. Auguste Dupin, from behind a perfectly opaque cloud of Latakia, "the reasons for the disappearance may not be so trivial."

"Well said, Dupin!" G— exclaimed, with his customary appearance of attempting to patronize my friend. "I can tell you that neither the United States Government nor the Government of His Most Christian Majesty is disposed to treat this affair as in the least trivial. To put you *au courant* with the favorite—and most hastily conceived—opinion, the North Americans maintain that Monsieur Solon P. Twinberrow, Second Secretary at the United States Legation in Paris, has been kidnaped or seduced from his duty by gold. In either case, the villain of the piece is France. The French opinion—I give it to you for what it is worth—is that Mr. Twinberrow has betrayed state secrets, and that his disappearance was entirely voluntary."

"Does the second rumor indicate the recipient of the secrets betrayed by Mr. Twinberrow?"

"Yes. French opinion inclines to see the hand of Spain in all this."

"How so?" Dupin inquired, puffing furiously at his *meerschäum*. "On what facts is this opinion based?—if there are any facts."

"There are some facts, right enough," answered the Prefect of the Parisian police. "Sufficient, at any rate, to make the theory of Spain's culpability plausible. In the first place, Monsieur Twinberrow's country shares Number 71, Rue de Grenelle St. Germain with the *charge d'affaires* of the Roman States."

"I did not appreciate the fact that the Legations of Pope Pius VIII and President Andrew Jackson shared the same building! Strange . . . and the Rue de Grenelle is only just around the corner! But pray continue. Spain is an exclusively Catholic country, and it is suggested that the Legation of the Roman States serves as a sort of clearinghouse through which persons friendly to Spain may send and receive messages? Just so! And what else has rumor found to uphold its suspicion of Mr. Twinberrow?"

"He is friendly with the Papal *charge d'affaires*. He often plays chess with him at the Café Procope. You raise your eyebrows? You have the look of asking, 'Why not?'"

"I shall even permit myself to ask it aloud. Well, why not?"

Is it a crime to play chess?"

"Monsieur Twinberrow has extensive properties in both Texas and California. It is said that he is sentimentally disposed toward Spain and her former colonies."

"Possibly. Yet 'Twinberrow' is a name with something so essentially Anglo-Saxon about it that one may hardly suppose a man bearing it to imagine himself more Iberian than British—or North American; to be precise. What else has been found in Mr. Twinberrow's disfavor? An extravagant mistress?"

"Worse. An extravagant wife. One may often disengage oneself from a mistress; but a wife—"

"Exactly. Does he gamble?"

"Yes. And, contrary to the general rule, he wins. He gambles to recoup something of the money that his wife spends; yet he wins. It is most unusual."

"Does he win honestly?"

"So far as we know, yes. Cards are something of a passion with the North Americans. With them, a man would be as ashamed of playing cards badly as one of us would be of a confessed inability to handle foils or pistols. No, Monsieur Twinberrow wins, not because he cheats, but because he plays with exceptional skill."

"If he wins often, then he must have made enemies?"

"We have taken that possibility into account," said G— portentously. "It has been easy to trace the persons who have lost heavily to this gentleman. He is, by the bye, a member of most of the best clubs in Paris—*Cercle des Echecs, Cercle de l'Union, Athenée Royal*, and perhaps others. It is not hard to find how much one wins—and another loses—when both are members of well-known clubs, where at least one of the club-domestics is a secret agent of the police."

"His politics?"

"Republican, only so far as he is the trusted servant of a republican system. Otherwise, when His Majesty murmurs, '*Je suis charme, Messieurs, de vous voir,*' as he acknowledges his guests at the Tuileries, be sure that he speaks to Monsieur Twinberrow among the assembly. Republican he may be; anti-monarchist he does not appear to be."

"Have the public sheets—I particularize the Opposition newspapers, *La Patrie*, say, or *Le Courrier Francais*—got wind of Mr. Twinberrow's disappearance?"

"I think not. Though, of course, we have the power to seize any newspaper containing news whose publication we

have decided is premature or against the public interest."

"And you wish me to find Mr. Twinberrow?"

"Find him, or provide the reason for his disappearance. For preference, I should like the explanation to avoid any heightening of the present tension between my Government and that of the United States. Great Britain's present policy is favorable to North America—any difference between France and the United States would be immediately, and ruthlessly, exploited by King William's ministry."

"This is an exceedingly curious affair," said Dupin, as though he were talking aloud to himself, and not addressing us. "Here we have a diplomat, accredited to the Legation of what is not yet, but will almost certainly become, a Great Power. So far as we know, the diplomat enjoys a good reputation, suffers from no serious entanglements, and though it is said that his wife is extravagant, he has the means to balance that extravagance."

"He does his diplomatic work well; he is in good standing with his own Government; though we must notice that, having no established Diplomatic Civil Service, the United States Government cannot offer its diplomats the same

security of profession that other Governments offer their foreign representatives. Like all other Americans in a similar position, Mr. Twinberrow must guard himself against dismissal through a mere change of executive administration. This fact might mean that he had contracted some undesirable friends or commitments. We shall see.

"You tell me that all the Governments concerned—in fact, in supposition, in possibility, and in plain rumor—have willingly cooperated?"

"I could not have wished for more wholehearted coöperation."

"This may mean everything—or nothing. But it may let us accept a few facts as probable, if not exactly proven. For instance, Mr. Twinberrow left the Legation in the Rue de Grenelle, intending to walk the few paces separating him from the Ministry of the Interior, where he had business. Watched by a domestic from the front door of the Legation, Mr. Twinberrow walked across the courtyard, through the small wicket-gate—the large carriage-gates were closed—and turned left."

"Dupin," said G— earnestly, "it is of vital import that we never lose sight of the fact that Monsieur Twinberrow was not

only observed by the domestic to walk across the courtyard, he was seen clearly to pass through the small wicket-gate, and then as clearly seen to turn to the left."

"My dear fellow!" Dupin protested, not unamiably. "Have I not said as much?"

"I think you should emphasize it more," said G— testily. "The whole mystery seems to depend upon the fact that Monsieur Twinberrow was seen to cross the yard, go out, and turn left."

"Precisely! But let me continue. At this moment the domestic caught sight of a packet that Mr. Twinberrow should have taken with him. This sealed packet was lying on a table which stands just within the front door of the Legation. Mr. Twinberrow, perhaps in putting on his gloves, had obviously laid the packet down, and had then departed without remembering to pick it up.

"The domestic caught up the packet, ran swiftly down the steps and across the courtyard, and so through the open wicket-gate. He looked left—no Mr. Twinberrow. He looked right—no Mr. Twinberrow.

"The mysterious aspect of the disappearance is that, at this part of the Rue de Grenelle St. Germain, there is nothing but an almost continuous high wall,

pierced only by the carriage-gates of the various houses on this street. The distance between the gates of Number 71, Rue de Grenelle St. Germain and the next pair of gates *on either side* is so distant that Mr. Twinberrow could have reached them only by running faster than ever did Atalanta. And a soberly-dressed diplomat, running, would have attracted considerable attention."

G— coughed, in a manner entirely characteristic of his fatuous self-satisfaction.

"Hem, hem! Monsieur Twinberrow, as a young midshipman in the war with Great Britain, sustained a severe injury to his right knee. Though he walks without too much difficulty, *he cannot run even two yards*. Dupin, there simply was not time for Monsieur Twinberrow to have reached a gateway on either side of his Legation before the domestic ran out into the street and tried to catch up with him."

"The gates opposite?"

"There is a blank wall. Opposite, the gates are even more distant. We have tested the fact that Monsieur Twinberrow could not have reached the shelter of a gate in the Rue de Grenelle before the domestic himself came into the street."

"Nevertheless, you have inquired diligently of those in the

neighboring houses?"

"Diligently. Openly—and secretly. We have asked the owners, we have examined the domestics. We have advertised for passers-by who might have seen something in the Rue de Grenelle on the day in question. Monsieur Twinberrow left the Legation of the United States to keep an appointment at the Ministry of the Interior. We know that he left the Legation. We know that he did not reach the Ministry. What happened to prevent his keeping his appointment, we cannot say. That, my dear Chevalier, is what we should like you to find out."

"You have placed all the facts before me?"

"All which are known to us. Is there anything more you would like to ask me?"

"You searched—or made inquiries—at all the neighboring houses, even those Mr. Twinberrow could not possibly have reached in the extremely short time that he was out of sight of the domestic? Yes, indeed. But did you also search *within* the carriage-gates? Unlikely as it would seem, Mr. Twinberrow may somehow have doubled back, and secreted himself in some back part of the courtyard—even within one of the coaches or carriages which stood there?"

"We searched *everywhere*."

said G— complacently. "I can assure you positively that Monsieur Twinberrow was not in the courtyard, nor in any of the coaches. Is there still something more you would like to ask me?"

"Only one thing. What was in the packet which was left on the table, and that the domestic was unable to hand back to Mr. Twinberrow?"

"Great heavens, Dupin! As though I could know! It would be more than my position as the Prefect of Police is worth to open such a packet."

Dupin puffed away at his meerschaum for several seconds before he commented, in a tone of some contempt.

"A sealed packet would not defy the skill of your expert letter-openers, nor would the fact that it was a diplomatically-privileged document prevent you from reading it. The fact is, my dear G—, you quite overlooked the packet in the excitement of looking for Mr. Twinberrow. Now, isn't that so?"

G— grimaced, but attempted to make light of the matter.

"Oh, well, Dupin, one may trust you to find some trifling irrelevancy. What has the packet to do with Monsieur Twinberrow's vanishing so mysteriously?"

"Why, as to that, I cannot say," responded Dupin coolly. "But I recommend that your agents find out, first, what happened to the packet, when the domestic found that he would be unable to return it to Mr. Twinberrow, and, second, what was in the packet—the nature of the documents or whatever it was that the packet contained. I should also like you to discover whether or not the packet had to do with Mr. Twinberrow's call on the Ministry. By the way, G—, does not this disappearance recall one which made great noise some years ago?"

"Indeed it does!" said G—. "It was in the time of the late Emperor. An English diplomat—Monsieur Be—Ba—Bo—"

"Bathurst?"

"Precisely what I was about to call him. It was on the tip of my tongue. Monsieur Bathurst, special envoy from his Britannic Majesty to the Court of the Austrian Emperor. He stopped at an inn, and stood in the courtyard while they watered his horses. He moved around the horses, and was never seen again. All the police forces of Europe hunted this Bathurst, but—"

"Exactly! Well, learn what was in the packet. And in the meanwhile I shall try to solve the problem of Mr. Twinber-

row's strange disappearance."

To those accustomed to meeting the polished and reserved gentlemen that the older nations send abroad as their official representatives, a first entry into the Legation of the United States may come as something of a shock.

There is an air of informality that many find refreshing and some find upsetting, but all find distinctly unusual—not to say unique. Here, one feels, is something of the true republican spirit; but not that of the first French Republic—rather, say, that of Periclean Athens.

We were greeted civilly enough, but with an absence of display. The domestics were in plain livery, without powder or shoulder-knots; and we were not kept waiting in an ante-room, the object of cynical inspection by footmen and *suisses*. Indeed, within a minute or so of our handing our cards to the porter, we were ushered into the Minister's private drawing-room.

"Gentlemen," said the Minister, when the customary salutations had been exchanged, "I shall tell you all that I know, for I am as anxious as His Majesty's Government to investigate this matter, discover the truth, and seek, if possible, to avert the graver results which

threaten so ominously. But, all the same, I must warn you that feelings may run very high among our people if Mr. Twinberrow is not found. Now, my dear Chevalier, ask me what you will."

"First, Excellency, I should like to see and speak to your domestic—the one who ran after Mr. Twinberrow."

"Your name is Louis Girardon," said Dupin, when the man stood before him. "Aged twenty-four, a native of Archachon. You have done your military service, and my friend, Monsieur G—, the Prefect of the Parisian police gives you a good character. His Excellency the Minister has kindly given me permission to ask you some questions."

"Yes, Girardon, answer all questions," said the Minister.

"Very good, Messieurs. What does Monsieur require to know?"

"You were in the front hall when Mr. Twinberrow left to go to the Ministry of the Interior. It was you, I believe, who noticed that he had forgotten a small packet—"

"I saw it lying on the side-table, Monsieur. I then recalled that Mr. Twinberrow had been carrying it in his hand when he came into the hall from his office, and that he had put it down so that he could

the more easily get into his *paletot*."

"You held the *paletot* so that Mr. Twinberrow could put it on?"

"Yes, Monsieur, as soon as Mr. Twinberrow came into the hall, I opened the door of the closet and took out his *paletot*. He laid down the packet and I helped him on with his overcoat. He said something like, 'Oh, I am in a hurry! I must not be late!'—and went out very quickly through the front door that I held open."

"Then I closed the door and came back into the hall. I noticed the packet lying on the table, and I opened the door again and ran out into the courtyard and through the small gate into the Rue de Grenelle, to try to catch Mr. Twinberrow before he entered the Ministry of the Interior."

"Which is only a few steps away from us," the Minister added.

Dupin frowned. "You said just now that you ran out 'to try to catch Mr. Twinberrow.' Why did you say *try* to catch him? Were you unsure of your ability to catch him? After all, you had only to cross the courtyard. You have done your military service, you are an active young man. Can you not run?"

"Oh, yes, Monsieur. But the

courtyard was so full of horses that—”

“Horses! Is this the Bathurst affair all over again?”

“You mean the Bathurst affair of some quarter-century ago?” asked the Minister. “I recall that. Yes, this case does remind me of it. You think there’s some connection, Chevalier?”

“That’s what we must discover. Girardon, these horses? Whose horses?”

“We had two callers at that moment, Monsieur. Mr. Cyrus Rogers, the American banker, who came in a coach-and-six, and Baron von Glueck, the military attaché of Hesse-Darmstadt, who came in a tilbury. Then—not for *us*, Messieurs, but for the Roman States—came two other carriages: one a light berline, of English make, I should say; the other a heavy, old-fashioned carriage, all covered with worn black leather and gilt studs—evidently from Italy. I know nothing of the persons whom they brought. But this made fourteen horses in the yard.”

“Did they delay you?” Dupin asked.

“Not really, Monsieur. I slipped between them and was out into the Rue de Grenelle within a matter of seconds. But I could not see Mr. Twinberrow.”

“So you returned to the Legation?”

“No, Monsieur. I did not understand how Mr. Twinberrow could have vanished so quickly from sight—at least, not without his having run; and I knew that he could not do that. All the same, I went quickly to the nearest gateway in the direction in which he had been intending to go, and saw at once that he was not in the courtyard. Still, I inquired of an ostler, and it was as he said: Mr. Twinberrow had not come through *that* pair of gates.

“It seemed unlikely that he would have gone the other way; still, I doubled back and tried the next pair of gates in *that* direction. Again I looked; again I inquired of a domestic within the courtyard. The same result, Messieurs—Mr. Twinberrow had vanished, as if from the face of the earth.”

The Minister asked: “Have you anything more to inquire of Girardon?”

“Yes. Tell me, Girardon, what did you do with the packet, once you saw that you would not be able to give it to Mr. Twinberrow?”

“The packet, Monsieur? I placed it on the table in Mr. Twinberrow’s office.”

“Go and fetch it, please.”

“I wonder what’s in it,” said the Minister, when the door had

closed behind the domestic.

"Paper," said Dupin.

"Probably. But I meant, what is on the paper?"

"Nothing," said Dupin quietly.

Girardon returned with the packet. It had been sealed with the Legation stamp, and was addressed, in what the Minister recognized as the missing Mr. Twinberrow's hand, to His Excellency the Minister of the Interior.

"Tell Girardon he may go," said Dupin; and, at a nod from the Minister, the man left us. Dupin handed the packet to the American Minister, who broke the seals and opened it. The packet contained sheets of blank paper.

"What on earth! But who would do such a foolish thing?"

"Someone," said Dupin dryly, "who wished Girardon to walk across the courtyard. Excellency, we have much to do before we can tell you what has happened to your missing Second Secretary."

"Between ourselves, Dupin," I asked, as we crossed the cobblestoned expanse which separated the front door of the Legation from the closed carriage-gates, "who would wish that Girardon should walk across the courtyard?"

"The person," Dupin replied

gravely, "who wished Girardon later to testify that Mr. Twinberrow had crossed the courtyard, passed through the open wicket-gate that is cut in the left-hand leaf of the larger carriage-gates, and then appeared to turn in the direction of the Ministry of the Interior."

"In other words," I said drily, "to recount what happened."

"To recount what the domestic *believed* had happened. It is by no means the same thing."

"Not in this case, Dupin? Oh, but he actually saw Mr. Twinberrow cross the courtyard and pass through the wicket-gate—"

"Yes, he saw that. And he saw Mr. Twinberrow, after he had passed through the wicket-gate, turn toward the left. But that is *all* he saw. However, let me, for the present, call your attention to the somewhat *odd* nature—the excessively odd nature, I might say—of the wicket-gate cut into the carriage-gates."

"Dupin," I said testily, "when you repeat yourself, I realize that there is something to which you wish to call my attention."

"You are correct. I wish to call your attention to the wicket-gate. You see nothing odd about its construction?"

No? Well, no matter; let us have a word with the concierge, as I perceive that he is in his little lodge and appears to be mightily interested in us."

Dupin walked up to the lodge, which stood, as is usual, just within the gates, and tapped on the window-pane. The window shot up with what I judged to be abnormal alacrity. "Messieurs?" the concierge asked.

"We are making some inquiries on behalf of Monsieur G—, of whom I expect you have heard." Dupin knew well that he could rely on the traditional Parisian's respect for the police; and as all the concierges of the French capital hold their positions only by acting as unpaid police informers, Dupin feared no lack of cooperation here.

"At your service, Messieurs. You wish to ask some questions?"

"The wicket-gate which has been cut in the main gates is of unusual design, I perceive."

"How so, Monsieur?"

"Well, usually such wicket-gates do not extend all the way to the ground, but have a sill some twenty centimeters high, over which one has to step in passing through. Ah, I see that you comprehend my meaning!"

"Yes, of course, Monsieur. You wish to call my attention

to the fact that this wicket-gate reaches to the ground just like any ordinary door. Well, now, we haven't had it like that so very long. A few days, only, come to that. You'll see that the wicket-gate itself has been strengthened with iron bars, to allow the former sill to be cut away."

"I take it that this was done at Mr. Twinberrow's request, because his bad knee made it somewhat difficult to raise his leg over the sill?"

"That is correct, sir," said the concierge. "It was he who arranged for the work to be done—though most other people appreciate the extra space that this new type of wicket-gate affords."

"Just so. The main gates are customarily kept locked—opened, of course, only to permit a carriage to enter or leave? Just so. And during the hours of daylight the wicket-gate itself is kept open—to save visitors the necessity of ringing for you and waiting for you to open it?"

"Yes, Monsieur. From my window I can see all who come and go."

A *pourboire* changed hands, and we walked to the open wicket, passing through it into the Rue Grenelle. Dupin laid a hand on my arm.

"Pause a moment! We have

not yet done with our examination of Number 71, Rue de Grenelle St. Germain. There is another curious—and equally significant—difference between this gate and others of its type. Whereas most of these gates—indeed, all that I have ever seen—open *inwards*, as do the shutters on windows in England, this one opens *outwards*—as do the shutters on windows in France.”

“Is that of importance, Dupin?”

“It is of the *first* importance! Notice that the hinges are too near the edge of the main gate for the wicket-gate to lie flat back. Therefore it is held open with a simple hook-and-eyelet fastened to the stone pillar from which the gate itself hangs. Ah! I see! We shall return this afternoon to tell His Excellency the truth about the disappearance of Mr. Solon P. Twinberrow.”

“But, Dupin, how can you be so positive that you will know the solution by this afternoon?”

Dupin smiled. “Because I know the answer already, but His Excellency will be the more ready to accept it if he believes that I have given it many hours of thought. Come! A short walk to the Rue du Four, and after that but a few steps along the Rue Dauphine, and we shall be

on the Quai Conti, where, at either the Café Conti or the Café Favier, we may have an excellent luncheon. The day is fine, and I know now what happened to Mr. Twinberrow.”

“First of all,” said Dupin, when we were once again seated in the drawing-room of the American Minister, “let us have Girardon back. Our missing diplomat had an accomplice—of that we may be sure.”

“Great heavens! Not Girardon, surely!”

“No, Girardon is not the accomplice. So far,” added Dupin drily, “he has not been a particularly trustworthy witness. However, be good enough to ring for him.”

“Girardon,” said Dupin, when the man had answered the bell, “I have some further questions. But one is of the utmost consequence. It was not *you*, was it, who noticed that Mr. Twinberrow had left the packet on the table? You acted with commendable promptitude, as soon as your attention had been called to the fact that the packet had been left behind. *But who first called your attention to the packet, Girardon?*”

“Well, Monsieur,” said the man nervously, “I assure you that I was not trying to take credit which did not belong to

me. It is simply that I did not consider the matter sufficiently important to mention that another domestic had said, 'Hello! the gentleman who has just left appears to have forgotten something!' I simply looked, saw that it was so, and hurried after Mr. Twinberrow as fast as I could. I have told you all this, Monsieur."

"In asking you to repeat it, we have established, for the first time, the presence of another domestic, whom you failed to mention before. Now, Girardon, who was this other domestic? Let us have him in here and ask *him* some questions. Do you know who he is?"

"No, Monsieur. I had never seen him before. He was wearing a different livery from my own—a blue livery, turned back with red, and with a large shoulder-knot. I took no particular notice, for we are always having the domestics of other Embassies and Legations in our hall and courtyard. But I think that the blue-and-red must have been the livery of Baron von Glueck's servants, as he was visiting us that day."

"Thank you. He may go now, Excellency."

When Girardon had left, Dupin turned to the Minister. "You must know Mr. Twinberrow much better than I,

Excellency. So you should have remembered that he was—is, I should say—an excellent card-player. He excels, I believe, at the game called 'poker'—a game which depends largely upon the quality that we shall call 'bluff.'

"Excellency, I did not conceive it to be part of my duty to discover *why* Mr. Twinberrow left—that is perhaps your concern, with which you must deal; though I suggest that the burden of marital infelicity is one that Mr. Twinberrow may, at last, have found insupportable. Ah, I see by Your Excellency's expression—well, no matter! Let it suffice that I conceived it to be my duty to show that Mr. Twinberrow left of his own accord and in a manner—and for a reason—which need not impair good relations between your country, Excellency, and others."

"But where on earth did he hide himself in the Rue de Grenelle?"

"Come, Excellency, and I shall show you."

Our little procession made its way through the hall, across the courtyard, and through the wicket-gate. In the street Dupin unlatched the wicket-gate and swung it so that this smaller door within the larger gate was now shut.

"You have now seen, Excel-

lency, all the clews. I suggest that we return to your drawing-room, and I shall tell you exactly what happened."

"It hardly matters at which point we begin," said Dupin, "but let us choose to begin with the alterations made in the wicket-gate.

"For what to him were sound personal reasons, Mr. Twinberrow decided to abandon his present personality and adopt another—that of a man who 'disappeared' in mysterious and seemingly impossible circumstances. I suggest that he has taken service with a Foreign Power, as a *franc-tireur*—perhaps even with France's Foreign Legion, perhaps with Spain's, perhaps with Great Britain's German Legion. He has *not* gone off to sell his country's secrets.

"You ask why? Because a spy—a traitor—seeks to keep the light away from himself; he does not, as Mr. Twinberrow has done, disappear in circumstances most conducive to getting himself widely discussed."

"But why did he go off in these highly unusual circumstances?"

"Simply explained, Excellency. He knew that a search of the neighboring houses and of the carriages within the court-

yard would yield nothing. If his disappearance were never explained, it would, nevertheless, not point the finger of suspicion at anyone in particular."

"But it has already done so!"

"Excellency! Only a few days have elapsed, and I am here with the explanation. I think that Mr. Twinberrow foresaw that an explanation was not impossible—was, in fact, highly probable. All he wished was to have the time and opportunity in which to make good his escape. He was not concerned to leave his escape a perpetual mystery, like that of Mr. Bathurst's disappearance."

"And how *did* our Second Secretary escape, Chevalier?"

"Let us return to the wicket-gate. Feigning that he found it troublesome, because of his injured knee, to raise his leg over the existing sill, he had the door extended downward, so that its lower edge touched the street. He also—though the concierge took no particular notice of this—ordered the workmen to rehang the door, so that it opened *outwards*.

"When I showed you the wicket-gate just now, Excellency, you must have noticed that the hinges of the re-hung wicket-gate were too near the edge of the main gate for the

wicket-gate to lie back flat when open? You must have noticed, too, that, when kept open, the wicket-gate was held with a simple hook-and-eyelet fastened to the stone pillar from which the leaf of the gate itself hangs? So!

"Now, because the wicket-gate *cannot be folded back flat*, that means there is a *triangular space behind the opened wicket-gate*. On the day of Mr. Twinberrow's disappearance, once the wicket-gate was opened and latched on the street, there was a space big enough to conceal a standing man. Because the door had been lengthened downward, the man's feet would be invisible. As a hiding-place it had undeniable advantages. It offered perfect concealment, and it was easily entered and left. It served the purposes of Mr. Twinberrow admirably.

"Let me describe to you what happened on the day when Mr. Twinberrow seemed to disappear from mortal ken. First, he needed an accomplice, who, I am certain, could be found—were one indiscreet enough to seek him—in the service of the military attaché of Hesse-Darmstadt."

"A domestic in livery?"

"In livery, yes. A domestic? I think not. Hesse-Darmstadt, if you remember, does a thriving

business in exporting trained soldiers—mercenaries—to more warlike neighbors. And, too, the ruler of Hesse-Darmstadt pays foreign volunteers more generously than does the ruler of France.

"Mr. Twinberrow arranged his disappearance for the day on which Baron von Glueck was due to call. I think that the presence of the other vehicles was purely natural and normal, and not connected with the plot.

"Mr. Twinberrow had taken care to provide himself with an appointment at the Ministry of the Interior—though what his business was there, I dare venture, Excellency, you do not know, nor does anyone else, since the business was entirely imaginary. Girardon, having seen the Second Secretary off, begins to close the front door when a domestic—whom he had never seen before—taps him on the arm, and says: 'Hasn't the gentleman forgotten something?'—and indicates the packet on the table. Girardon, without much thought, picks up the packet and rushes out to intercept Mr. Twinberrow.

"But Mr. Twinberrow has slipped within the triangular space behind the wicket-gate, and thus Girardon does not see him throughout the length and breadth of the Rue de Grenelle.

Through the crack at the hinge, Mr. Twinberrow sees Girardon go into the courtyard of the next house, and your Second Secretary takes this opportunity to slip out of his temporary hiding-place."

"And where does he go then?"

"Onto the box of Baron von Glueck's tilbury. You may have observed that a nail had been driven into the wicket-gate. On this was hanging a coachman's heavy coat, in the von Glueck livery—big enough to cover even the *paletot* that Mr. Twinberrow wore. There was also a coachman's hat. Mr. Twinberrow changed his own for this—his own he left behind the door, to be collected later, when the hue and cry had died down."

"But there must have been a coachman already, to drive the Baron to this Legation."

"Assuredly. Instructed by Mr. Twinberrow, he had come into the house by a back way. It was he who called Girardon's attention to the apparently forgotten packet."

"But suppose that Girardon had seen the packet immediately and handed it to Mr. Twinberrow?"

"Excellency, there was no forgotten packet to hand to him. The false German coachman brought the packet with

him and it was he who laid it on the table for Girardon to find. No matter what Girardon may say *now*, he does not remember that Mr. Twinberrow walked into the hall bearing a sealed packet; he has been persuaded, by one of the simplest tricks in the stage-conjuror's *repertoire*, that he had seen what he had not, in fact, seen. Girardon, Excellency, is an innocent dupe."

"But suppose someone had noticed that there were *two* coachmen in the same livery?"

Dupin laughed. "I reminded you, did I not, that Mr. Twinberrow played poker—a game in which the psychological exploitation of one's opponent is carried to a fine art, if not perhaps to an exact science. Your Excellency, *there were not two coachmen in the von Glueck livery—there was only one!*

"You look astonished. Let me explain.

"Having called Girardon's attention to the 'planted' letter, and seen him off the premises, the accomplice, who had driven the Baron into the courtyard, and is still, of course, wearing the Baron's livery, opens the door of the hall-closet, takes out the fashionable hat which he had carefully placed within, slips off his livery coat, and puts it at the back of the closet;

beneath the coachman's heavy garment he is wearing his own doubtless fashionable coat.

"It is probable that there was a cane within the closet; almost certainly, there would have been gloves. With the latest bolivar from Servas on his head, a coat from Blanc, and boots, let us assume, from Lecerre, a walking-cane from Cazal, and a riband of some order in the buttonhole—with all these, who would question or look twice at such a man emerging from the front entrance?

"No one did. He walked across the courtyard and into

the Rue de Grenelle. There was no one missing within the gates—and no extra person to whom attention might be called. The Baron—ignorant of the fact that he is aiding a diplomatic disappearance—entered his vehicle; the 'coachman' whipped up, and away went the Baron in his tilbury—with Mr. Twinberrow on the box. I take it that there will now be no increase in the bitterness and danger that this business has caused?"

"You may so take it, Chevalier. Both France and the United States have much for which to thank you!"



Celia Fremlin

From the Locked Room Upstairs

What are the ingredients of the contemporary Gothic story now so popular again? The late Anthony Boucher suggested the genre name of Gothica (partly because most of the new Gothics are written, or supposedly written, by women); an alternate name possibility might be Romantica; and Michael Avallone has described the new vintage as "tales of doom," requiring "three essentials of story design: (1) damsel in distress; (2) atmosphere and mood; and (3) the menace of the old versus the new."

Surely Celia Fremlin's "From the Locked Room Upstairs" qualifies on all counts: it has a woman in distress, atmosphere and mood, and the menace of the old versus the new. It has, too, the expected and necessary old house—rickety, decrepit, derelict; but most important, it has the enormity of terror and the insignia of twisted malice so indispensable to a Gothic tale, old or new . . .

A door banged in the empty flat upstairs.

Margaret felt her fingers tighten on the covers of her library book, but she refused to look up. As long as she could keep her eyes running backward and forward along the lines of print, she could tell herself that she hadn't given in to her fear—to this ridiculous, unreasoning fear that had so inexplicably laid hold of her this evening.

What was there to be afraid

of, anyway? Simply that the upstairs flat had been empty all this week, and that Henry was on duty tonight? But she had often been alone before—if you could call it alone, with Robin and Peter in bed in the very next room. Two little boys of six and eight sound asleep in bed can't really be called company, but still . . .

Leonora hesitated, wondering which way she should turn.

Margaret realized that she was still reading the same

sentence, over and over again, and she shut the book with an angry little slam. What *was* the matter with her? Was it that murder in the papers—some woman strangled by a poor wretch who had been ill-treated in his childhood? He had a grudge against women, or something—Margaret hadn't followed it very carefully—had locked himself in an empty room in this woman's house, and then, in the middle of the night, had crept out . . .

All very horrid, of course; but then one was always reading of murders in the papers—anyway, they'd probably caught him by now. Now, what had she better do to put these silly ideas out of her head once and for all?

Go upstairs, of course. Go upstairs to the empty flat, look briskly through all the rooms, shut firmly whichever door it was that was banging, and come down again, her mind set at rest. Simple.

She put her book down on the little polished table at her side. But why was she putting it down so softly, so cautiously? Margaret shook herself irritably. There wasn't the slightest need to be quiet. Nothing ever seemed to wake the boys once they were properly off, and poor deaf old Mrs. Palmer on the ground floor certainly

wouldn't be troubled.

Just to convince herself, she picked the book up again and dropped it noisily on the table. Then, with a firm step, she walked out to the landing.

The once gracious staircase of the old house curved down into complete blackness. For a moment Margaret was taken aback. Even though old Mrs. Palmer was often in bed before ten, she always left the hall light on for the other tenants—perhaps, too, for her own sake, from a deaf woman's natural anxiety not to be shut away in darkness as well as silence.

Margaret stood for a moment, puzzled. Then she remembered. Of course; the poor old thing had gone off this morning on one of her rare visits to a married niece. Tonight the downstairs flat was empty, too.

Margaret was annoyed to feel her palms growing sticky as she gripped the top of the bannisters, peering down into the darkness. What on earth difference did it make whether Mrs. Palmer was there or not? Even if she was there, she would have been asleep by now, deep, deep in her world of silence, far out of reach of any human voice . . . of any screams . . .

Snap out of it, girl! Margaret scolded herself. This is what

comes of reading mystery stories in the evening instead of catching up with the ironing as I meant to! She turned sharply round and walked across the landing to the other staircase—the dusty, narrower staircase that led to the empty flat above.

The hall stairs were in bad enough repair, goodness knew, but these were worse. As Margaret turned the bend which cut her off from the light of her own landing, she could feel the rotten plaster crumbling under her hand as she felt her way up in the darkness.

The pitter-patter of plaster crumbs falling onto the stairboards was a familiar enough sound to Margaret after six months in this decrepit old house; but all the same she wished the little noise would stop. It seemed to make her more nervous—to get in the way of something. And it was only then that she realized how intently her ears were strained to hear some sound from the empty rooms overhead.

But what sound? Margaret stood on the top landing listening for a moment before she reached out for the light switch.

Bother! The owners, who in all these months had never raised a finger to repair rotting plaster, broken locks, and split

window frames, had nevertheless bestirred themselves in less than a week to switch off the electric light supply to the vacant flat! Now she would have to explore the place in the dark.

She felt her way along the wall to the first of the four doors that she knew opened onto this landing. It opened easily; and Margaret again silently cursed the owners. If only they'd take the trouble to fix locks on their own property she would have been spared all this—the top flat would have been properly locked up the moment the Davidsons left, and then there would have been no possibility of anyone lurking there. Her annoyance strengthened her, and she flung the door wide open.

Empty, of course. Accustomed as her eyes were to the complete blackness of the landing, the room seemed to her quite brightly lit by the dim square of the window, and she could see at a glance into every empty corner.

The next room was empty, too, and the next, except for the twisted, shadowy bulk of the antique gas cooker which Mrs. Davidson so often declared had "gone gunny on her," and might she boil up a kettle on the slightly newer cooker in Margaret's flat?

But the fourth door was locked. Nothing surprising in that, Margaret told herself, turning the shaky china knob this way and that without success. Not surprising at all. All the rooms ought to have been locked like this—probably this was the only one which *would* lock, and the owners had lazily hoped for the best about the others. A perfectly natural explanation: no need to turn the handle so stealthily . . .

To prove the point, Margaret gave the knob a brisk rattle, and it came off in her hand. Just like this house! she was thinking, and heard the corresponding knob on the other side of the door fall to the floor with a report like a pistol in the silence of the night.

But what was *that*? It might have been the echo of the bang, of course, in the empty room. Or—yes, of course, that must be it! Margaret let her breath go in a sigh of relief. That scraping, tapping noise—that was exactly the noise a china knob would make, rolling lopsidedly across the bare boards. Wasn't it?

Yes, of course it was. Margaret was surprised to find how quickly she had got back to her own flat—to her lighted sitting-room—to her own fire-side, her heart beating annoyingly, and the dirty china knob still in her hand.

Leonora hesitated, wondering which way she should turn.

Margaret pushed the book away with a gesture of irritation. She had thought that by facing her fear—by going up to the empty flat, looking in all the rooms and shutting the doors firmly so that they couldn't bang, she would have regained her peace of mind. Yet here she was, sitting just as before, her heart thumping, her ears straining for she did not know what.

What is it all about? she asked herself. Has anything happened today to make me feel nervous? Have I subconsciously noticed anyone suspicious lurking about outside? God knows it's a queer enough neighborhood! And leaning her chin on her hands, her thick black curls falling forward onto her damp forehead, she thought over the day.

Absolutely nothing out of the ordinary. Henry had gone to work as usual. The boys had been got off to school with the usual amount of clatter and argument—Peter unable to find his wellingtons, and Robin announcing, at the very last moment, just as they were starting down the steps, that his teacher had said they were all to bring a cardboard box four inches wide and a long thin piece of string.

Then had followed the morning battle for cleanliness against the obstinate old house. The paintwork that collapsed into dry rot if you wiped it too thoroughly. The cobwebs that brought bits of plaster down with them when you got at them with a broom . . .

They weren't going to be here much longer, that was one thing, reflected Margaret. They would be moving to the country soon after Christmas, and it hadn't seemed worthwhile to look for anywhere else to live for such a short time. Besides, if they *had* to live in a flat with two lively small boys, this ramshackle old place offered some advantages. Among all this decay no one was going to notice sticky fingermarks and more chipped paint; no one was going to complain about what games the children played in the neglected garden, overgrown with brambles and willow herb. No one minded their boots, and the boots of their numerous small friends, clattering up and down the stairs.

Margaret smiled as she thought of the odd assortment of friends her sons had managed to collect during their six months here. Such a queer mixture of children in a neighborhood like this, ranging from real little street toughs to

the bespectacled son of a divorced but celebrated professor. Always in and out of the house—Margaret couldn't put a name to half of them. That crowd this afternoon, for instance—who *were* they all?

Margaret wrinkled her brows, trying to remember. Alan, of course, the freckle-faced mischief from the paper shop at the corner. And Raymond—the fair, sly boy that Henry said she shouldn't let the children play with—but what could you do? And William—stodgy, mouse-colored William—who simply came to eat her cakes, it seemed to Margaret, for he never played at anything in particular with the others.

Oh, and there had been another one today—a new one, for whom Margaret had felt an immediate revulsion. About eight or nine he must have been, very small for his age and yet strangely mature, with a sharp, shrewd light in his pale, red-rimmed eyes. He had a coarse mop of ill-cut ginger hair and the palest of pale eyebrows and eyelashes, almost invisible in his pale, pinched face. And he was painfully thin.

In spite of her dislike, Margaret had been touched by the thinness—and puzzled, too—real undernourishment is so rare in children nowadays. She had pressed on him cakes and

bread and jam, but he had not eaten anything—indeed, he seemed scarcely aware that anything was being offered him—and in the end Margaret had given up and let the others demolish the provisions with their usual speed.

Margaret shivered, suddenly cold, and leaned forward to put more coal on the fire. The memory of this queer, ginger-haired child had somehow made her feel uneasy all over again. She wished she'd made more effort to find out who he was and where he came from, but the boys were always so vague about that sort of thing.

"What, Mummy?" Peter had said when she had asked him about the child that evening; "Mummy, you said *I* could have the next corn-flake packet. . ."

"Yes, yes, darling, but listen. Who was that little ginger-haired boy you brought home from school today?"

"Who did?" interrupted Robin helpfully.

"Well—Peter, I suppose. Or do you know him, Robin? Perhaps he's *your* friend?"

"Who is?"

Margaret had sighed. "The little ginger-haired boy. The one who hardly ate anything at tea."

"I didn't hardly eat anything, either," remarked Robin smugly.

"Ooo—you story!" broke in Peter indignantly. "I saw you myself, you had three cakes, and . . ."

Margaret had given it up, and determined to ask the child himself if he ever turned up again.

And, strangely enough, as she had gone across their own landing to put on the boys' bath, she thought she caught a glimpse of the little creature in the hall below, darting past the foot of the stairs. But she couldn't be sure; dusk always fell early in that dim, derelict hall, and the whole thing might have been a trick of the light. Anyway, when she had gone to the back door and called into the damp autumn twilight, there had been no answer, and nothing stirred among the rank, overgrown shrubs and weeds.

Margaret picked up her book again, slightly reassured. All this could quite reasonably explain her nervousness tonight. She was feeling guilty, that's what it must be. There was something peculiar about the child, and she should have made more effort to find out about him. Perhaps he needed help—after all, there *were* cases of child cruelty and neglect even nowadays. Tomorrow she would really go into the matter, and then there would be nothing more to worry about.

Leonora hesitated, wondering which way she should turn.

Sometimes, on waking from a deep sleep, one knows with absolute certainty that something has wakened one, but without knowing what. Margaret knew, with just this certainty, that something had made her raise her eyes from the book. She listened—listened as she had listened before that night—to the deep pulsing in her ears, to the tiny flickering murmur of the coals. Nothing more.

But wasn't there? What was that, then, that faint, faint shuffle on the landing outside? Shuffle, shuffle, soft as an autumn leaf drifting—shuffle shuffle—pad pad . . . silently the door swung open and there stood Robin, blinking, half asleep.

Margaret let out her breath in a gasp of relief.

"Robin! Whatever's the matter? Why aren't you asleep?"

Robin blinked at her owlishly, his eyes large and round as they always were when just wakened from sleep.

"I don't like that little boy in my bed," he observed.

"What little boy? Whatever are you talking about, Robin?"

"That little boy. He's horrid. He pinches me. And he's muddling the blankets."

"Darling, you're dreaming! Come along and let's see!"

Taking the child's hand, Margaret led him back into his own room and switched on the light.

There was Peter, rosily asleep with his mouth open as usual; and there was Robin's little bed, empty, and with the clothes tumbled this way and that as if he had tossed about a lot in his sleep.

This confirmed Margaret's opinion that he had had a nightmare. After all, what was more likely after her cross-questioning about the mysterious little visitor that evening? In spite of his apparent inattention, Robin had no doubt sensed something of the anxiety and distaste behind her questions, and it was the most likely thing in the world that he would dream about it when he went to bed.

However, to reassure the child, Margaret embarked on a thorough search of the little room. Under both the beds they looked, into the clothes closet, behind the curtains—even, at Robin's insistence, into the impossibly narrow space behind the chest of drawers.

"He was such a *thin* little boy, you see, Mummy," Robin explained, and the phrase gave Margaret a nasty little pang of uneasiness. The hungry, too-old

little face seemed to hover before her for a moment, it's eyes full of ancient, malicious knowledge. She blinked it away, shut the lid of the brick box (what an absurd place to look!), and bundled Robin firmly back to bed.

"And do you promise I won't dream it again?" asked Robin anxiously, and Margaret promised. This was the standard formula after Robin's nightmares. It had always worked before.

Nearly twelve o'clock. There was nothing whatever to stay up for, but somehow Margaret couldn't bring herself to go to bed. She reached out toward her library book, but felt that she could not face Leonora's indecision again, and instead picked up yesterday's evening paper. She would look for something cheerful to read before she went to bed. The autumn fashions, perhaps—or would it be the spring ones they'd be writing about in October? It was all very confusing nowadays.

But it wasn't the autumn fashions she found herself reading—or the spring ones. It was the blurred photograph of the wanted man that caught her eye—a man in his fifties perhaps—from such a bad picture it was difficult to tell. A picture of the murdered

woman, too—a Mrs. Harriet somebody—and a description of her...

Margaret's attention suddenly became riveted and she read the report from beginning to end, hardly daring to breathe. This man, at large somewhere in London tonight, had escaped from a mental institution where he had been sent some years ago for strangling another woman in somewhat similar circumstances to this Mrs. Harriet...

Margaret felt her limbs grow rigid. Both women had been the mothers of small boys... both had lived in tall derelict houses converted into flats... both had had black hair done in tight curls... Margaret fingered her hairstyle with damp, trembling fingers, and tried not to read any more, but her eyes seemed glued to the page. Why had the man not been hanged that first time?

There followed the story of his childhood—a story of real Dickensian horror. Brought up in a tall ruined old-house by a stepmother who had starved him, thrashed him, shut him in dark rooms where she told him clawed fiends were waiting... her black, shining curls had quivered over his childhood like the insignia of torture and death. The prison doctors had learned all this from him after

the first murder—and had learned, too, how the sight of a black-haired woman going up the steps of just such a derelict house as he remembered had brought back his terror and misery with such vividness that “I didn’t just *feel* like a little boy again—I *was* a little boy . . . that was my house . . . that was *her*”—that was the only way he could describe it. And he had crept into the house, locked himself in one of the empty rooms until the dead silence of the night, and then crept out, with a child’s enormity of terror and hatred in his heart, and with a man’s strength in his fingers . . .

Margaret closed her eyes for a second, and then opened them again to read the description of the murderer: “About fifty years of age, medium height, ginger hair growing gray, eyebrows and eyelashes almost invisible . . .” With every word the face leaped before her more vividly—not the face of the aging, unknown man, but the little malevolent face she had seen that afternoon—the ill-cut ginger hair, the little red-rimmed eyes filled with the twisted malice of an old and bitter man . . .

“I didn’t just *feel* like a little boy again, I *was* a little boy . . .” The words beat through Margaret’s brain.

She thrust the paper away from her. Don’t be so fanciful and absurd, she told herself. After all, if I *really* think anything’s wrong all I’ve got to do is call the police. There’s the telephone just there in the hall.

She walked slowly to the door and out onto the landing, and stood there in her little island of light with darkness above and below. She tried to go on telling herself what nonsense it all was, how ridiculous she was being. But now she dared not let any more words come into her mind, not any words at all. For she was listening—listening as civilized human beings rarely have need to listen—listening as an animal listens in the murderous blackness of the forest. Not just, with the ears—rather with the whole body. Every organ, every nerve is alert, pricked up, so that, in the end, it is impossible to say through which sense the message comes, and comes with absolute certainty: Danger is near. Danger is on the move.

For there was no sound. Margaret was certain of that. No sound to tell her that something was stirring in the locked room upstairs—that dark, empty room so like the locked room where once a little boy had gone half mad with terror at the thought of the clawed fiends. The clawed

fiends who had lost their terrors through the years and become his friends and allies, for now at last he was a clawed fiend himself.

Still Margaret heard no sound. No sound to tell that the door of the empty room was being unlocked, silently, and with consummate skill, from the inside. No shuffle of footsteps across the dusty upstairs landing. No creak from the ancient, rickety steps of that top flight of stairs.

And in the end it was not Margaret's straining ears at all which caught the first hint of the oncoming creature—it was her eyes. They seemed to have been riveted on that shadowy bend in the bannisters for so long that when she saw the hand at last, long and tapering, like five snakes coiled round the rail, she could have imagined it had been there all the time, flickering in and out and dancing before her eyes.

But not the face. No, that couldn't have been there before. Not anywhere, in all the world, could there have been a face like that—a face so distorted, so alight with hate that it seemed almost luminous as it leered out of the blackness, as it seemed to glide down toward her a foot or two above the bannister...

There was a sound now—a

quick pattering of feet, horribly light and soft, like a child's, as they bore the heavy adult shape down the stairs, the white, curled fingers reaching out toward her...

A little frightened cry at Margaret's elbow freed her from her paralysis. A little white face, a tangle of ginger hair... and an instinct stronger than that of self-preservation gripped her. In a second she was on her knees, her arms round the small trembling body; she felt the little creature's shaking terror subsiding into a great peace as she held him against her breast.

That dropping on her knees was her salvation. In that very second her assailant lunged, tripped over her suddenly lowered body, and pitched headlong down the stairs behind her. Crash upon crash as he fell from step to step, and then silence. Absolute silence.

Then a new clamor rose.

"Mummy! Mummy! Who...? What...?"—a tangle of small legs and arms, and in a moment her arms seemed to be full of little boys. She collected her wits and looked down at them. Only two of them, of course, her own two, their familiar dark heads pressed against her, their frightened questions clamoring in her ears...

And when the police came, and Henry came, and the dead man was taken away, there was so much to tell. It could all be explained quite easily, of course (as Henry pointed out), with only a little stretching of coincidence.

The little ginger-haired boy must come from somewhere in the neighborhood—no doubt he could be traced, and if necessary helped in some way. Margaret's obsession about him would explain Robin's dream; it would also explain why, in that moment of terror, she imagined

the strange child had rushed into her arms. Really, of course, it must have been one of her own boys.

And yet, Margaret could never forget the smile on the face of the dead man as he lay crumpled at the foot of the stairs. They say that the faces of the dead can set in all sorts of incongruous expressions, but it seemed to Margaret that the smile had not been the smile of a grown man at all; it had been the smile of a little boy who has felt the comfort of a mother's arms at last.



Hugh Pentecost

The Day the Children Vanished

One bright clear winter's afternoon, between the towns of Clayton and Lakeview, a school bus with nine children and a driver vanished from the face of the earth—vanished into thin air on a two-mile stretch of road where disappearance was impossible—simply, utterly impossible! One of Hugh Pentecost's finest novelets . . .

Detective: CLYDE HAVILAND

On a bright, clear winter's afternoon the nine children in the town of Clayton who traveled each day to the Regional School in Lakeview disappeared from the face of the earth, along with the bus in which they traveled and its driver, as completely as if they had been sucked up into outer space by some monstrous interplanetary vacuum cleaner.

Actually, in the time of hysteria which followed the disappearance, this theory was put forward by some distraught citizen of Clayton, and not a few people, completely stumped for an explanation, gave consideration to it.

There was, of course, nothing interplanetary or supernatural about the disappearance

of nine children, one adult, and a special-bodied station wagon which was used as a school bus. It was the result of callous human villainy. But, because there was no possible explanation for it, it assumed all the aspects of black magic in the minds of tortured parents and a bewildered citizenry.

Clayton is seven miles from Lakeview. Clayton is a rapidly growing quarry town. Lakeview, considerably larger and with a long history of planning for growth, recently built a new school. It was agreed between the boards of education of the two towns that nine children living at the east end of Clayton should be sent to the Lakeview School where there was adequate space and teaching staff.

It was to be just a temporary expedient.

Since there were only nine children, they did not send one of the big, forty-eight-passenger school buses to get them. A nine-passenger station wagon was acquired, properly painted and marked as a school bus, and Jerry Mahoney, a mechanic in the East Clayton Garage, was hired to make the two trips each day with the children.

Jerry Mahoney was well liked and respected. He had been a mechanic in the Air Force during his tour of duty in the armed services. He was a wizard with engines. He was engaged to be married to Elizabeth Deering, who worked in the Clayton Bank and was one of Clayton's choice picks. They were both nice people, responsible people.

The disappearance of the station wagon, the nine children, and Jerry Mahoney took place on a two-mile stretch of road where disappearance was impossible. It was called the "dugway," and it wound along the side of the lake. Heavy wire guard-rails protected the road from the lake for the full two miles. There was not a gap in it anywhere.

The ground on the other side of the road rose abruptly upward into thousands of acres of mountain woodlands, so

thickly grown that not even a tractor could have made its way up any part of it except for a few yards of deserted road that led to an abandoned quarry. Even over this old road nothing could have passed without leaving a trail of torn brush and broken saplings.

At the Lakeview end of the dugway was a filling station owned by old Jake Nugent. On the afternoon of the disappearance the bus, with Jerry Mahoney at the wheel and his carload of kids laughing and shouting at each other, stopped at old man Nugent's. Jerry Mahoney had brought the old man a special delivery letter from the post office, thus saving the RFD driver from making a special trip. Jerry and old Jake exchanged greetings, the old man signed the receipt for his letter—which was from his son in Chicago asking for a loan of fifty dollars—and Jerry drove off into the dugway with his cargo of kids.

At the Clayton end of the dugway was Joe Gorman's Diner, and one of the children in Jerry's bus was Peter Gorman, Joe's son. The Diner was Jerry's first stop coming out of the dugway.

It was four thirty in the afternoon when Joe Gorman realized that the bus was nearly three-quarters of an hour late.

Worried, he called the school in Lakeview and was told by Miss Bromfield, the principal, that the bus had left on schedule.

"He may have had a flat, or something," Miss Bromfield suggested.

This was one of seven calls Miss Bromfield was to get in the next half hour, all inquiring about the bus. Nine children; seven families.

Joe Gorman was the first to do anything about it seriously. He called Jake Nugent's filling station to ask about the bus, and old Jake told him it had gone through from his place on schedule. So something had happened to Jerry and his bus load of kids in the dugway. Joe got out his jeep and headed through the dugway toward Lakeview. He got all the way to Jake Nugent's without seeing the bus or passing anyone coming the other way.

Jake Nugent was a shrewd old gent, in complete possession of all his faculties. He didn't drink. When he said he had seen the bus—that it had stopped to deliver his letter—and that he had watched it drive off into the dugway, you had to believe it. Cold sweat broke out on Joe Gorman's face as he listened. The dugway had a tendency to be icy. He had noticed coming over that it hadn't been sanded. Joe hadn't been looking for a

major tragedy. But if the bus had skidded, gone through the guard-rail . . .

He used Jake's phone to call the Dicklers in Clayton. The Dicklers' two children, Dorothy and Donald, were part of Jerry's load and they were the next stop after Joe's Diner. The Dicklers were already alarmed because their children hadn't come home.

Joe didn't offer any theories. He was scared, though. He called the trooper barracks in Lakeview and told them about the missing bus. They didn't take it too seriously, but said they'd send a man out.

Joe headed back for Clayton. This time his heart was a lump in his throat. He drove slowly, staring at every inch of the wire guard-rails. There was not a break anywhere, not a broken or bent post. The bus simply couldn't have skidded over the embankment into the lake without smashing through the wire guard-rail.

Joe Gorman felt better when he came out at his diner at the Clayton end. He felt better, but he felt dizzy. Five minutes later Trooper Teliski came whizzing through from Lakeview and stopped his car.

"What's the gag?" he asked Joe.

Joe tried to light a cigarette and his hands were shaking so

badly he couldn't make it. Teliski snapped on his lighter and held it out. Joe dragged smoke deep into his lungs.

"Look," he said. "The bus started through the dugway at the regular time." He told about Jerry's stop at Nugent's. "It never came out this end."

A nerve twitched in Teliski's cheek. "The lake," he said.

Joe shook his head. "I—I thought of that, right off. I just came through ahead of you—looking. Not a break in the guard-rail anywhere. Not a scratch. Not a bent post. The bus didn't go into the lake. I'll stake my life on that."

"Then what else?" Teliski asked. "It couldn't go up the mountain."

"I know," Joe said, and the two men stared at each other.

"It's some kind of a joke," Teliski said.

"What kind of a joke? It's no joke to me—or the Dicklers. I talked to them."

"Maybe they had permission to go to a special movie or something," Teliski said.

"Without notifying the parents? Miss Bromfield would have told me, anyway. I talked to her. Listen, Teliski. The bus went into the dugway and it didn't come out. It's not in the dugway now, and it didn't go into the lake."

Teliski was silent for a

moment, and then he spoke with a solid attempt at common sense. "It didn't come out this end," he said. "We'll check back on that guard-rail, but let's say you're right. It didn't skid into the lake. It couldn't go up the mountain. So where does that leave us?"

"Going nuts!" Joe said.

"It leaves us with only one answer. The station wagon never went into the dugway."

Joe Gorman nodded. "That's logic," he said. "But why would Jake Nugent lie? Jerry's an hour and three-quarters late now. If he didn't go in the dugway, where is he? Where *could* he go? Why hasn't he telephoned if everything is okay?"

A car drove up and stopped. A man got out and came running toward them. It was Karl Dickler, father of two of the missing children. "Thank God you're here, Teliski. What's happened?"

"Some kind of a gag," Teliski said. "We can't figure it out. The bus never came through the dugway."

"But it did!" Karl Dickler said.

"It never came out this end," Joe Gorman said. "I was watching for Pete, naturally."

"But it did come through!" Dickler said. "I passed them myself on the way to Lakeview. They were about half a mile

this way from Jake Nugent's. I saw them! I waved at my own kids!"

The three men stared at each other.

"It never came out, this end," Joe Gorman said, in a choked voice.

Dickler swayed and reached out to the trooper to steady himself. "The lake!" he whispered.

But they were not in the lake. Joe Gorman's survey proved accurate; no broken wire, no bent post, not even a scratch . . .

It was nearly dark when the real search began. Troopers, the families of the children, the selectmen, the sheriff and twenty-five or thirty volunteer deputies, a hundred or more school friends of the missing children.

The lake was definitely out. Not only was the guard-rail intact, but the lake was frozen over with about an inch of ice. There wasn't a break in the smooth surface of the ice anywhere along the two miles of shore bordering the dugway.

Men and women and children swarmed through the woods on the other side of the road, knowing all the time it was useless. The road was called the "dugway" because it had been dug out of the side of the

mountain. There was a gravel bank about seven feet high running almost unbrokenly along that side of the road. There was the one old abandoned trail leading to the quarry. It was clear, after walking the first ten yards of it, that no car had come that way. It couldn't.

A hundred phone calls were made to surrounding towns and villages. No one had seen the station wagon, the children, or Jerry Mahoney. The impossible had to be faced.

The bus had gone into the dugway and it hadn't come out. It hadn't skidded into the lake and it hadn't climbed the impenetrable brush of the mountain. It was just gone! Vanished into thin air!

Everyone was deeply concerned for and sympathetic with the Dicklers, and Joe Gorman, and the Williamses, the Trents, the Ishams, the Nortons, and the Jennings, parents of the missing children. Nobody thought much about Jerry Mahoney's family, or his girl.

It wasn't reasonable, but as the evening wore on and not one speck of evidence was found or one acceptable theory advanced, people began to talk about Jerry Mahoney. He was the driver. The bus had to have been driven somewhere. It

couldn't navigate without Jerry Mahoney at the wheel. Jerry was the only adult involved. However it had been worked—this disappearance—Jerry must have had a hand in it.

It didn't matter that, until an hour ago, Jerry had been respected, trusted, liked. Their children were gone and Jerry had taken them somewhere. Why? Ransom. They would all get ransom letters in the morning, they said. A mass kidnaping. Jerry had the kids somewhere. There weren't any rich kids in Clayton, so he was going to demand ransom from all seven families.

Thus Jerry Mahoney became a villain because there was no one else to suspect. Nobody stopped to think that Jerry's father and Jerry's girl might be as anxious about his absence as the others were about the missing children.

At nine thirty Sergeant Mason and Trooper Teliski of the State Police, George Peabody, the sheriff, and a dozen men of the community including Joe Gorman and Karl Dickler stormed into the living room of Jerry Mahoney's house where an old man with silvery white hair sat in an overstuffed armchair. Elizabeth Deering, Jerry's fiancée, was huddled on the floor beside him, her face buried on his knees, weeping.

The old man wore a rather sharply cut gray flannel suit, a bright scarlet vest with brass buttons, and a green necktie that must have been designed for a St. Patrick's Day parade. As he stroked the girl's blonde hair, the light from the lamp reflected glittering shafts from a square-cut diamond in a heavy gold setting he wore on his little finger. He looked up at Sergeant Mason and his small army of followers, and his blue eyes stopped twinkling as he saw the stern look on the Sergeant's face.

"All right, Pat," Sergeant Mason said. "What's Jerry done with those kids?" Pat Mahoney's pale-blue eyes met the Sergeant's stare steadily. Then crinkles of mirth appeared at the corners of his eyes and mouth.

"I'd like to ask you something before I try to answer that," Pat Mahoney said.

3d "Well?"

"Have you stopped beating your wife, Sergeant?" Pat Mahoney asked. His cackle of laughter was the only sound in the room . . .

There are those who are old enough to remember the days when Mahoney and Faye were listed about fourth on a bill of eight star acts all around the

Keith-Orpheum vaudeville circuit. Pat Mahoney was an Irish comic with dancing feet, and Nora Faye—Mrs. Mahoney to you—could match him at dancing and had the soprano voice of an angel.

Like so many people in show business, Pat was a blusterer, a boaster, a name dropper, but with it all a solid professional who would practice for hours a day to perfect a new routine, never missed an entrance in forty years, and up to the day young Jerry was born in a cheap hotel in Grand Rapids, Michigan, had given away half what he earned to dead beats and hopeless failures.

The diamond ring he wore today had been in and out of a hundred hock shops. It had been the basis of his and Nora's security for more years than he liked to remember.

If you were left alone with Pat for more than five minutes, he went back to the old days—to the people he had idolized, like Sophie Tucker, and Smith and Dale, and Williams and Wolfus, and Joe Jackson. He'd known them all, played on the same bills with them. "But," he would tell you, and a strange radiance would come into the pale-blue eyes, "the greatest of them all was Nora Faye—Mrs. Mahoney to you."

Once he was started on his Nora, there was no way of stopping Pat Mahoney. He told of her talents as a singer and dancer, but in the end it was a saga of endless patience, of kindness and understanding, of love for a fat-headed, vain little Irish comic, of tenderness as a mother, and finally of clear-eyed courage in the face of stark tragedy.

Mahoney and Faye had never played the Palace, the Broadway goal of all vaudevillians. Pat had worked on a dozen acts that would crack the ice and finally he'd made it.

"We'd come out in cowboy suits, all covered with jewels, and jeweled guns, and jeweled boots, and we'd do a little soft shoe routine, and then suddenly all the lights would go out and only the jewels would show—they were made special for that—and we'd go into a fast routine, pulling the guns, and twirling and juggling them, and the roof would fall in! Oh, we tried it out of town, and our agent finally got us the booking at the Palace we'd always dreamed of."

There'd be a long silence then, and Pat would take a gaudy handkerchief from his hip pocket and blow his nose with a kind of angry violence. "I can show you the costumes still. They're packed away in a

trunk in the attic. Just the way we wore them—me, and Nora—the last time we ever played. Atlantic City, it was. And she came off after the act with the cheers still ringing in our ears, and down she went on the floor of the dressing room, writhing in pain.

"Then she told me. It had been getting worse for months. She didn't want me to know. The doctor had told her straight out. She'd only a few months she could count on. She'd never said a word to me—working toward the Palace—knowing I'd dreamed of it. And only three weeks after that—she left us. Me and Jerry—she left us. We were standing by her bed when she left—and the last words she spoke were to Jerry. 'Take care of Pat,' she says to him. 'He'll be helpless without someone to take care of him.' And then she smiled at me, and all the years were in that smile."

And then, wherever he happened to be, when he told the story, Pat Mahoney would wipe the back of his hand across his eyes and say, "If you'll excuse me, I think I'll be going home."...

Nobody laughed when Pat pulled the old courtroom wheeze on Sergeant Mason about "have you stopped beating your wife." Pat looked

past the Sergeant at Trooper Teliski, and Joe Gorman, and Karl Dickler, and Mr. and Mrs. Jennings, whose two daughters were in the missing bus, and George Peabody, the fat, wheezing sheriff.

"The question I asked you, Sergeant," he said, "makes just as much sense as the one you asked me. You asked me what Nora's boy has done with those kids? There's no answer to that question. Do I hear you saying, 'I know what you must be feeling, Pat Mahoney, and you, Elizabeth Deering? And is there anything we can do for you in this hour of your terrible anxiety?' I don't hear you saying that, Sergeant."

"I'm sorry, Pat," Mason said. "Those kids are missing. Jerry had to take them somewhere."

"No!" Liz Deering cried. "You all know Jerry better than that!"

They didn't, it seemed, but they could be forgiven. You can't confront people with the inexplicable without frightening them and throwing them off balance. You can't endanger their children and expect a sane reaction. They muttered angrily, and old Pat saw the tortured faces of Joe Gorman and Karl Dickler and the swollen red eyes of Mrs. Jennings.

"Has he talked in any way queerly to you, Pat?" Mason

asked. "Has he acted normal of late?"

"Nora's boy is the most normal boy you ever met," Pat Mahoney said. "You know that, Sergeant. Why, you've known him since he was a child."

Mrs. Jennings screamed out, "He'd protect his son. Naturally he'd protect his son. But he's stolen our children!"

"The Pied Piper rides again," Pat Mahoney said.

"Make him talk!" Mrs. Jennings cried, and the crowd around her muttered louder.

"When did you last see Jerry, Pat?"

"Breakfast," Pat said. "He has his lunch at Joe Gorman's Diner." The corner of his mouth twitched. "He should have been home for dinner long ago."

"Did he have a need for money?" Mason asked.

"Money? He was a man respected—until now—wasn't he? He was a man with a fine girl in love with him, wasn't he? What need would he have for money?"

"Make him answer sensibly!" Mrs. Jennings pleaded in a despairing voice.

Joe Gorman stepped forward. "Pat, maybe Jerry got sick all of a sudden. It's happened to men who saw action overseas. Maybe you saw signs of something and

wouldn't want to tell of it. But my Pete was on that bus, and Karl's two, and Mrs. Jennings' two. We're nowhere, Pat—so if you can tell us anything! Our kids were on that bus!"

Pat Mahoney's eyes, as he listened to Joe Gorman, filled with pain. "My kid is on that bus, too, Joe," he said.

They all stared at him, some with hatred. And then, in the distance, they heard the wail of a siren. The troopers' car was coming from Lakeview, hell-bent.

"Maybe it's news!" someone shouted.

And they all went stumbling out of the house to meet the approaching car—all but Elizabeth Deering, who stayed behind, clinging to the old man.

"I don't understand it," she said, her voice shaken. "They think he's harmed their children, Pat! Why? Why would they think he'd do such a thing? Why?"

Old Pat's eyes had a faraway look in them. "Did I ever tell you about The Great Thurston?" he asked. "Greatest magic act I ever saw."

"Pat!" Elizabeth said, her eyes widening in horror.

"First time I ever caught his act was in Sioux City," Pat said. "He came out in a flowing cape, and a silk hat, and he . . ."

Dear God, he's losing his

reason, Elizabeth Deering told herself. Let the news be good! Let them be found safe!

The police car with its wailing siren carried news, but it was not the sort the people of Clayton were hoping to hear.

It was reassuring to know that within a few hours of the tragedy the entire area was alerted, that the moment daylight came a fleet of Army helicopters would cover the area for hundreds of miles around, that a five-state alarm was out for the missing station wagon and its passengers, and that the Attorney General had sent the best man on his staff to direct and coordinate the search.

Top officials, viewing the case coldly and untouched by the hysteria of personal involvement, had a theory. Of course there had to be a rational explanation of the disappearance of the bus, and Clyde Haviland, tall, stoop-shouldered, scholarly-looking investigator from the Attorney General's office, was ordered to produce that explanation as soon as possible upon his arrival in Clayton. But beyond that, officials had no doubt as to the reason for the disappearance: this was a mass kidnaping—something novel in the annals of crime.

Since none of the families involved had means, Haviland and his superiors were convinced the next move in this strange charade would be a demand on the whole community to pay ransom for the children. The F.B.I. was alerted to be ready to act the moment there was any indication of involvement across state lines.

While mothers wept and the menfolk grumbled angrily that Jerry Mahoney, the driver, was at the bottom of this, officialdom worked calmly and efficiently. The Air Force turned over its complete data on Technical Sergeant Jerry Mahoney to the F.B.I. Men who had known Jerry in the service were awakened from their sleep or pulled out of restaurants or theaters to be questioned. Had he ever said anything that would indicate he might move into a world of violence? Did his medical history contain any record of mental illness?

Sitting at a desk in the town hall, Clyde Haviland reported on some of this to George Peabody, the sheriff, the town's three selectmen, Sergeant Mason, and a couple of other troopers. Haviland, carefully polishing his shell-rimmed glasses, was a quiet, reassuring sort of man. He had a fine reputation in the state. He was not an unfamiliar figure to

people in Clayton because he had solved a particularly brutal murder in the neighboring town of Johnsville, and his investigation had brought him in and out of Clayton for several weeks.

"So far," he said, with a faint smile, "the report on Jerry Mahoney is quite extraordinary."

"In what way?" Sergeant Mason asked, eager for the scent of blood.

"Model citizen," Haviland said. "No one has a bad word for him. No bad temper. Never held grudges. Never chiseled. Saves his money. His savings account in the Clayton bank would surprise some of you. On the face of it, he's the last person in the world to suspect."

"There has to be a first time for everything," Karl Dickler said. He was a selectman as well as one of the bereaved parents.

"It's going down toward zero tonight," George Peabody, the sheriff, said glumly. "If those kids are out anywhere—"

"They're one hell of a long way from here by now, if you ask me," Sergeant Mason said.

Haviland looked at him, his eyes unblinking behind his glasses. "Except that they never came out of the dugway."

"Nobody saw them," Mason said. "But they're not there so they did come out."

"They didn't come out," Joe Gorman said. "I was watching for them from the window of my diner."

"There were the three seconds you were getting something out of the icebox in your pantry," Mason said.

"And I suppose everyone else along Main Street had his head in a closet at just that time!" Joe Gorman said.

"Or someone reached down out of the heavens and snatched that station wagon up into space," Haviland said. He was looking at Peabody's pudgy face as he spoke, and something he saw there made him add quickly, "I'm kidding, of course."

Peabody laughed nervously. "It's the only explanation we've had so far."

Karl Dickler put his hand up to his cheek. There was a nerve there that had started to twitch, regularly as the tick of a clock. "I like Jerry. I'd give the same kind of report on him you've been getting, Mr. Haviland. But you can't pass up the facts. I'd have said he'd defend those kids with his life. But did he? And the old man—his father. He won't answer questions directly. There's something queer about him. Damn it, Mr. Haviland, my kids are out there, somewhere!" He waved toward the frosted windows.

"Every highway within two hundred miles of here is being patrolled, Mr. Dickler," Haviland said. "If they'd driven straight away from here in daylight—granting Mason is right and everybody was in a closet when the station wagon went through town—they'd have been seen a hundred times after they left Clayton. There isn't one report of anyone having seen the station wagon with the school-bus markings." Haviland paused to light a cigarette. His tapering fingers were nicotine-stained.

"If you'd ever investigated a crime, Mr. Dickler, you'd know we usually are swamped with calls from people who think they've seen the wanted man. A bus—a bus load of kids. Somebody *had* to see it! But there isn't even a crackpot report. If there was someplace he could have stayed under cover—and don't tell me, I know there isn't—and started moving after dark, he might get some distance. But alarms are out everywhere. He couldn't travel five miles now without being trapped."

"We've told ourselves all these things for hours!" Dickler said, pinching savagely at his twitching cheek. "What are you going to *do*, Haviland?"

"Unless we're all wrong," Haviland said, "we're going to

hear from the kidnapers soon. Tonight—or maybe in the morning—by mail, or phone, or in some unexpected way. But we'll hear. They'll demand money. What other purpose can there be? Once we hear, we'll have to start to play it by ear. That's the way these cases are."

"Meanwhile you just sit here and wait!" Dickler said, a kind of despair rising in his voice. "What am I going to say to my wife?"

"I think all the parents of the children should go home. You may be the one the kidnapers contact. It may be your child they put on the phone to convince you the kids are safe," Haviland said. "As soon as it's daylight—"

"You think the kids *are* safe?" Dickler cried out.

Haviland stared at the distraught father for a minute. Then he spoke, gently. "What kind of assurance could I give you, Mr. Dickler? Even if I tried, you wouldn't believe me. People who play this kind of game are without feelings, not rational. When you fight them, you have to walk quietly. If you scare them, God knows what to expect. That's why I urge you all to go home and wait." He dropped his cigarette and heeled it out. "And pray."

Elizabeth Deering, Jerry

Mahoney's girl, was sick with anxiety. Jerry was foremost in her mind; Jerry, missing with the children; Jerry, worse than that, suspected by his friends. But on top of that was old Pat Mahoney.

He hadn't made the slightest sense since the angry crowd had left his house. He had talked on endlessly about the old days in vaudeville. He seemed obsessed with the memory of the first time he had seen The Great Thurston in Sioux City. He remembered card tricks, and sawing the lady in half, and his wife Nora's childish delight in being completely bewildered. He seemed to remember everything he had seen the man do.

Elizabeth tried, but she could not bring Pat back to the present. The tragedy seemed to have tipped him right out of the world of reason. She was partly relieved when she heard firm steps on the front porch. The other part of her, when she saw Sergeant Mason and the tall stranger, was the fear that they had news—bad news about Jerry.

Mason was less aggressive than he had been on his first visit. He introduced Haviland and said they wanted to talk to Pat. Elizabeth took them back into the living room where old Pat still sat in the over-stuffed armchair.

Mason introduced Haviland. "Mr. Haviland is a special investigator from the Attorney General's office, Pat."

Pat's eyes brightened. "Say, you're the fellow that solved that murder over in Johnsville, aren't you?" he said. "Smart piece of work."

"Thanks," Haviland said. He looked at Pat, astonished at his gaudy vest and tie and the glittering diamond on his finger. He had been prepared for Pat, but not adequately.

"Sit down," Pat said. "Maybe Liz would make us some coffee if we asked her pretty."

Mason nodded to Liz, who went out into the kitchen. He followed her to tell her there was no news. Haviland sat down on the couch next to Pat, stretched out his long legs, and offered Pat a cigarette.

"Don't smoke," Pat said. "Never really liked anything but cigars. Nora hated the smell of 'em. So what was I to do? You go to vaudeville in the old days, Mr. Haviland?"

"When I was a kid," Haviland said, lighting a cigarette. "I never had the pleasure of seeing you, though, Mr. Mahoney."

"Call me Pat," Pat said. "Everyone does. I was nothing, Mr. Haviland. Just a third-rate song-and-dance man. But if you ever saw my Nora..."

Haviland waited for him to go on, but Pat seemed lost in his precious memories.

"You must be very worried about your son, Pat," he said.

For a fractional moment the mask of pleasant incompetence seemed to be stripped from Pat's face. "Wouldn't you be?" he asked, harshly. Then, almost instantly, the mask was fitted back into place, and old Pat gave his cackling laugh. "You got theories, Mr. Haviland? How're you going to handle this case?"

"I think," Haviland said conversationally, "that the children and your son have been kidnaped. I think we'll hear from the kidnapers soon. I think, in all probability, the whole town will be asked to get up a large ransom."

Pat nodded. "I'll chip in this diamond ring," he said. "It's got Jerry out of trouble more than once."

Haviland's eyes narrowed. "He's been in trouble before?"

"His main trouble was his pop," Pat said. "Sometimes there wasn't enough to eat. But we could always raise eating money on this ring." He turned his bright, laughing eyes directly on Haviland. "You figured out how the bus disappeared?"

"No," Haviland said.

"Of course it doesn't really matter, does it?" Pat said.

"Well, if we knew—" Haviland said.

"It wouldn't really matter," Pat said. "It's what's going to happen now that matters."

"You mean the demand for money?"

"If that's what's going to happen," Pat said. The cackling laugh suddenly grated on Haviland's nerves. The old joker did know something!

"You have a different theory, Pat?" Haviland asked, keeping his exasperation out of his voice.

"You ever see The Great Thurston on the Keith-Orpheum circuit?" Pat asked.

"I'm afraid not," Haviland said.

"Greatest magic act I ever saw," Pat said. "Better than Houdini. Better than anyone. I first saw him in Sioux City—"

"About the case here, Pat," Haviland interrupted. "You have a theory?"

"I got no theory," Pat said. "But I know what's going to happen."

Haviland leaned forward. "What's going to happen?"

"One of two things," Pat said. "Everybody in this town is going to be looking. They're going to be looking for that station wagon in the lake, where they know it isn't, and they're going to be looking for it in the woods, where they

know it isn't. That's one thing that may happen. The other thing is, they buy this theory of yours, Mr. Haviland—and it's a good theory, mind you—and they all stay home and wait to hear something. There's one same result from both things, isn't there?"

"Same result?"

"Sure. Nobody in Clayton goes to work. The quarries don't operate. The small businesses will shut down. People will be looking and people will be waiting..."

"So?"

"So what good will that do anyone?" Pat asked.

Haviland ground out his cigarette in an ashtray. "It won't do anyone any good. The quarry owners will lose some money. The small businesses will lose some."

"Not much point in it, is there?" Pat said, grinning.

Haviland rose. He'd had about enough. Mason and Elizabeth were coming back from the kitchen with coffee. "There isn't much point to anything you're saying, Mr. Mahoney."

Pat's eyes twinkled. "You said you never saw The Great Thurston, didn't you?"

"I never saw him," Haviland said.

"Well, we'll see. If they're supposed to stay home and

wait, they'll stay home and wait. If they're supposed to be out searching, they'll be out searching. Ah, coffee! Smells real good. Pull up a chair, Sergeant. By the way, Mr. Haviland, I'll make you a bet," Pat said.

"I'm not a betting man," Haviland said.

"Oh, just a manner-of-speaking bet," Pat said. "I'll make you a bet that tomorrow morning they'll be out searching. I'll make you a bet that *even if you order them to stay home and wait*, they'll be out searching!"

"Look here, Pat, if you know something..."

A dreamy look came into Pat's eyes. "Nora was so taken with The Great Thurston that time in Sioux City I went around to see him afterwards. I thought maybe he'd show me how to do a few simple tricks. I pretended it was for Nora, but really I thought we might use 'em in our act. He wouldn't tell me anything—that is, not about any of his tricks. But he told me the whole principle of his business."

"Sugar?" Elizabeth asked Haviland. Poor old man, she thought.

"The principle is," Pat said, "to make your audience think only what you want them to think, and see only what you

want them to see." Pat's eyes brightened. "Which reminds me, there's something I'd like to have you see, Mr. Haviland."

Haviland gulped his coffee. Somehow, he felt mesmerized by the old man. Pat was at the foot of the stairs, beckoning. Haviland followed.

Elizabeth looked at Mason and there were tears in her eyes. "It's thrown him completely off base," she said. "You know what he's going to show Mr. Haviland?" Sergeant Mason shook his head.

"A cowboy suit!" Elizabeth said, and dropped down on the couch, crying softly. "He's going to show him a cowboy suit."

And she was right. Haviland found himself in the attic, his head bowed to keep from bumping into the sloping beams. Old Pat had opened a wardrobe trunk and with the gesture of a waiter taking the silver lid off a tomato surprise, revealed two cowboy suits, one hanging neatly on each side of the trunk—Nora's and his. Chaps, shirt, vest, boots, Stetson, and gun belt—all studded with stage jewelry.

"...and when the lights went out," Pat was saying, "all you could see was these gewgaws, sparkling. And we'd take out the guns..." And suddenly Pat had the two

jeweled six-shooters in his hands, twirling and spinning them. "In the old days I could draw these guns and twirl 'em into position faster than Jesse James!"

The spell was broken for Haviland. The old guy was cuckoo. "I enjoyed seeing them, Mr. Mahoney," he said. "But now I've got to get back. . ."

As soon as dawn broke, Haviland had Sergeant Mason and Sheriff George Peabody take him out to the scene of the disappearance. Everyone else was at home, waiting to hear from the kidnapers. It had been a terrible night for the whole town, a night filled with forebodings and dark imaginings. Haviland covered every inch of the two-mile stretch of the dugway. And he couldn't get away from the facts. There was no way for it to have happened—but it had happened.

About eight thirty he was back in Clayton in Joe's Diner, stamping his feet to warm them and waiting eagerly for eggs and toast to go with his steaming cup of black coffee. All the parents had been checked. There'd been no phone calls, no notes slipped under doors, nothing in the early-morning mail.

Haviland never got his breakfast. Trooper Teliski came

charging into the diner just as Joe Gorman was taking the eggs off the grill. Teliski, a healthy young man, was white as parchment, and the words came out of him in a kind of choking sob. "We've found 'em," he said. "Or at least we know where they are. Helicopters spotted 'em. I just finished passing the word in town."

Joe Gorman dropped the plate of eggs on the floor behind the counter. Haviland spun around on his counter stool. Just looking at Teliski made the hair rise on the back of his neck.

"The old quarry off the dugway," Teliski said, and gulped for air. "No sign of the bus. It didn't drive up there. But the kids." Teliski steadied himself on the counter. "Schoolbooks," he said. "A couple of coats—lying on the edge of the quarry. And in the quarry—more of the same. A red beret belonging to one of the kids—"

"Peter!" Joe Gorman cried.

Haviland headed for the door. The main street of Clayton was frightening to see. People were running out of houses, screaming at each other, heading crazily toward the dugway. Those who went for their cars scattered the people in front of them. There was no order—only blind panic.

Haviland stood on the curb outside the diner, ice in his veins. He looked down the street to where old Pat Mahoney lived, just in time to see a wildly weeping woman pick up a stone and throw it through the front window of Pat's house.

"Come on—what's the matter with you?" Teliski shouted from behind the wheel of the State Police car.

Haviland stood where he was, frozen, staring at the broken window of Pat Mahoney's house. The abandoned quarry, he knew, was sixty feet deep, full to within six feet of the top with icy water fed in by constantly bubbling springs.

A fire engine roared past. They were going to try to pump out the quarry. It would be like bailing out the Atlantic Ocean with a tea cup.

"Haviland!" Teliski called desperately.

Haviland still stared at Pat Mahoney's house. A cackling old voice rang in his ears. "I'll make you a bet, Mr. Haviland. I'll make you a bet that even if you order them to stay at home and wait, they'll be out searching."

Rage such as he had never known flooded the ice out of Haviland's veins. So Pat had known! The old codger had known *last night!*

Special Investigator Haviland had never witnessed anything like the scene at the quarry.

The old road, long since overgrown, which ran about 200 yards in from the dugway to the quarry, had been trampled down as if by a herd of buffalo.

Within three-quarters of an hour of the news reaching town, it seemed as if everyone from Clayton and half the population of Lakeview had arrived at the quarry's edge.

One of the very first Army helicopters, which had taken to the air at dawn, had spotted the clothes and books at the edge of the abandoned stone pit.

The pilot had dropped down close enough to identify the strange objects and radioed immediately to the State Police. The stampede had followed.

Haviland was trained to be objective in the face of tragedy, but he found himself torn to pieces by what he saw. Women crowded forward, screaming, trying to examine the articles of clothing and the books. Maybe not all the children were in this icy grave. It was only the hope of desperation. No one really believed it. It seemed, as Trooper Teliski had said, to be the work of a maniac.

Haviland collected as many facts about the quarry as he could from Sheriff Peabody.

"Marble's always been Clayton's business," Peabody said. "Half the big buildings in New York have got their marble out of Clayton quarries. This was one of the first quarries opened up by the Clayton Marble Company nearly sixty years ago. When they started up new ones, this one was abandoned."

In spite of the cold, Peabody was sweating. He wiped the sleeve of his plaid hunting shirt across his face. "Sixty feet down, and sheer walls," he said. "They took the blocks out at ten-foot levels, so there is a little ledge about every ten feet going down. A kid couldn't climb out of it if it was empty."

Haviland glanced over at the fire engine which had started to pump water from the quarry. "Not much use in that," he said.

"The springs are feeding it faster than they can pump it out," Peabody said. "There's no use telling them. They got to feel they're doing something." The fat sheriff's mouth set in a grim slit. "Why would Jerry Mahoney do a thing like this? Why? I guess you can only say the old man is a little crazy, and the son has gone off his rocker, too."

"There are some things that don't fit," Haviland said. He noticed his own hands weren't steady as he lit a cigarette. The

hysterical shrieking of one of the women near the edge of the quarry grated on his nerves. "Where is the station wagon?"

"He must have driven up here and—done what he did to the kids," Peabody said. "Then waited till after dark to make a getaway."

"But you searched this part of the woods before dark last night," Haviland said.

"We missed it somehow, that's all," Peabody said stubbornly.

"A nine-passenger station wagon is pretty hard to miss," Haviland said.

"So we missed it," Peabody said. "God knows how, but we missed it." He shook his head. "I suppose the only thing that'll work here is grappling hooks. They're sending a crane over from one of the active quarries. Take an hour or more to get it here. Nobody'll leave here till the hooks have scraped the bottom of that place and they've brought up the kids."

Unless, Haviland thought to himself, the lynching spirit gets into them. He was thinking of an old man in a red vest and a green necktie and a diamond twinkling on his little finger. He was thinking of a broken window pane—and of the way he'd seen mobs act before in his time.

Someone gripped the sleeve

of Haviland's coat and he looked down into the horror-struck face of Elizabeth Deering, Jerry Mahoney's girl.

"It's true then," she whispered. She swayed on her feet, holding tight to Haviland for support.

"It's true they found some things belonging to the kids," he said. "That's all that's true at the moment, Miss Deering." He was a little astonished by his own words. He realized that, instinctively, he was not believing everything that he saw in front of him. "This whole area was searched last night before dark," he said. "No one found any schoolbooks or coats or berets then. No one saw the station wagon."

"What's the use of talking that way?" Peabody said. His eyes were narrowed, staring at Liz Deering. "I don't want to believe what I see either, Mr. Haviland. But I got to." The next words came out of the fat man with a bitterness that stung like a whiplash. "Maybe you're the only one in Clayton that's lucky, Liz. You found out he was a homicidal maniac in time—before you got married to him."

"Please, George!" the girl cried. "How can you believe—"

"What can anyone believe but that?" Peabody said, and turned away.

Liz Deering clung to Haviland, sobbing. The tall man stared over her head at the hundreds of people grouped around the quarry's edge. He was reminded of a mine disaster he had seen once in Pennsylvania: a whole town waiting at the head of the mine shaft for the dead to be brought to the surface.

"Let's get out of here," he said to Liz Deering, with sudden energy.

Clayton was a dead town. Stores were closed. Joe's Diner was closed. The railroad station agent was on the job, handling dozens of telegrams that were coming in from friends and relatives of the parents of the missing children. The two girls in the telephone office, across the street from the bank, were at their posts.

Old Mr. Granger, a teller in the bank, and one of the stenographers were all of the bank staff that had stayed on the job. Old Mr. Granger was preparing the payroll for the Clayton Marble Company. He didn't know whether the truck from the company's offices with the two guards would show up for the money or not.

Nothing else was working on schedule today. Even the hotel down the street had closed. One or two salesmen had driven into

town, heard the news, and gone off down the dugway toward the scene of the tragedy. A few very old people tottered in and out the front doors of houses, looking anxiously down Main Street toward the dugway. Even the clinic was closed. The town's doctors and nurses had all gone to the scene of the disaster.

Down the street a piece of newspaper had been taped over the hole in Pat Mahoney's front window. Pat Mahoney sat in the big over-stuffed armchair in his living room. He rocked slowly back and forth, staring at an open scrapbook spread across his knees. A big black headline from a show-business paper was pasted across the top.

MAHONEY AND FAYE

BOFFO BUFFALO

Under it were pictures of Pat and Nora in their jeweled cowboy suits, their six-shooters drawn, pointing straight at the camera. There was a description of the act, the dance in the dark with only the jewels showing and the six-shooters spouting flame. "Most original number of its kind seen in years," a Buffalo critic had written. "The ever popular Mahoney and Faye have added something to their familiar routines that should please theater audiences from coast to coast. We are not surprised to hear that they have

been booked into the Palace."

Pat closed the scrapbook and put it down on the floor beside him. From the inside pocket of his jacket he took a wallet. It bulged with papers and cards. He was an honorary Elk, honorary police chief of Wichita in 1927, a Friar, a Lamb.

Carefully protected by isinglass were some snapshots. They were faded now, but anyone could see they were pictures of Nora with little Jerry at various stages of his growth. There was Jerry at six months, Jerry at a year, Jerry at four years. And Nora, smiling gently at her son. The love seemed to shine right out of the pictures, Pat thought.

Pat replaced the pictures and put the wallet back in his pocket. He got up from his chair and moved toward the stairway. People who knew him would have been surprised. No one had ever seen Pat when his movements weren't brisk and youthful. He could still go into a tap routine at the drop of a hat, and he always gave the impression that he was on the verge of doing so. Now he moved slowly, almost painfully—a tired old man, with no need to hide it from anyone. There was no one to hide it from; Jerry was missing, Liz was gone.

He climbed to the second

floor and turned to the attic door. He opened it, switched on the lights, and climbed up to the area under the eaves. There he opened the wardrobe trunk he'd shown to Haviland. From the left side he took out the cowboy outfit—the chaps, the boots, the vest and shirt and Stetson hat, and the gun belt with the two jeweled six-shooters. Slowly he carried them down to his bedroom on the second floor. There Pat Mahoney proceeded to get into costume.

He stood, at last, in front of the full-length mirror on the back of the bathroom door. The high-heeled boots made him a couple of inches taller than usual. The Stetson was set on his head at a rakish angle. The jeweled chaps and vest glittered in the sunlight from the window. Suddenly old Pat jumped into a flat-footed stance, and the guns were out of the holsters, spinning dizzily and then pointed straight at the mirror.

"Get 'em up, you lily-livered rats!" old Pat shouted. A bejeweled gunman stared back at him fiercely from the mirror.

Then, slowly, he turned away to a silver picture frame on his bureau. Nora, as a very young girl, looked out at him with her gentle smile.

"It'll be all right, honey,"

Pat said. "You'll see. It'll be another boffo, honey. Don't you worry about your boy. Don't you ever worry about him while I'm around."

It was a terrible day for Clayton, but Gertrude Naylor, the chief operator in the telephone office, said afterward that perhaps the worst moment for her was when she spotted old Pat Mahoney walking down the main street—right in the middle of the street—dressed in that crazy cowboy outfit. He walked slowly, looking from right to left, staying right on the white line that divided the street.

"I'd seen it a hundred times before in the movies," Gertrude Naylor said afterward. "A cowboy, walking down the street of a deserted town, waiting for his enemy to appear—waiting for the moment to draw his guns. Old Pat's hands floated just above those crazy guns in his holster, and he kept rubbing the tips of his fingers against his thumb. I showed him to Millie, and we started to laugh, and then, somehow, it seemed about the most awful thing of all. Jerry Mahoney had murdered those kids and here was his old man, gone nutty as a fruitcake."

Old Mr. Granger, in the bank, had much the same

reaction when the aged, bejeweled gun toter walked up to the teller's window.

"Good morning, Mr. Granger," Pat said, cheerfully.

"Good morning, Pat."

"You're not too busy this morning, I see," Pat said.

"N-no," Mr. Granger said. The killer's father—dressed up like a kid for the circus. He's ready for a padded cell, Mr. Granger thought.

"Since you're not so busy," Pat said, "I'd like to have a look at the detailed statement of my account for the last three months." As he spoke, he turned and leaned against the counter, staring out through the plate-glass bank window at the street. His hands stayed near the guns, and he kept rubbing his fingertips against the ball of his thumb.

"You get a statement each month, Pat," Mr. Granger said.

"Just the same, I'd like to see the detailed statement for the last three months," Pat said.

"I had to humor him, I thought," Mr. Granger said later. "So I went back in the vault to get his records out of the files. Well, I was just inside the vault door when he spoke again, in the most natural way, 'If I were you, Mr. Granger,' he said, 'I'd close that vault door, and I'd stay inside, and I'd set off all the alarms I could lay my

hands on. You're about to be stuck up, Mr. Granger.'

"Well, I thought it was part of his craziness," Mr. Granger said later. "I thought he meant *he* was going to stick up the bank. I thought that was why he'd got all dressed up in that cowboy outfit. Gone back to his childhood, I thought. I was scared, because I figured he was crazy. So I *did* close the vault door. And I *did* set off the alarm, only it didn't work. I didn't know then all the electric wires into the bank had been cut."

Gertrude and Millie, the telephone operators, had a box seat for the rest of it. They saw the black sedan draw up in front of the bank and they saw the four men in dark suits and hats get out of it and start up the steps of the bank. Two of them were carrying small suitcases and two of them were carrying guns.

Then suddenly the bank doors burst open and an ancient cowboy appeared, hands poised over his guns. He did a curious little jig step that brought him out in a solid square stance. The four men were so astonished at the sight of him they seemed to freeze.

"Stick 'em up, you lily-livered rats!" old Pat shouted. The guns were out of the holsters, twirling. Suddenly they belched

flame, straight at the bandits.

The four men dived for safety, like men plunging off the deck of a sinking ship. One of them made the corner of the bank building. Two of them got to the safe side of the car. The fourth, trying to scramble back into the car, was caught in the line of fire.

"I shot over your heads that first time!" Pat shouted. "Move another inch and I'll blow you all to hell!" The guns twirled again and then suddenly aimed steadily at the exposed bandit. "All right, come forward and throw your guns down," Pat ordered.

The man in the direct line of fire obeyed at once. His gun bounced on the pavement a few feet from Pat and he raised his arms slowly. Pat inched his way toward the discarded gun.

The other men didn't move. And then Gertrude and Millie saw the one who had gotten around the corner of the bank slowly raise his gun and take deliberate aim at Pat. She and Millie both screamed, and it made old Pat jerk his head around. In that instant there was a roar of gunfire.

Old Pat went down, clutching at his shoulder. But so did the bandit who'd shot him and so did one of the men behind the car. Then Gertrude and Millie saw the tall figure of Mr.

Haviland come around the corner of the hotel next door, a smoking gun in his hand. He must have spoken very quietly because Gertrude and Millie couldn't hear him, but whatever he said made the other bandits give up. Then they saw Liz Deering running across the street to where old Pat lay, blood dripping through the fingers that clutched at his shoulder.

Trooper Teliski's car went racing through the dugway at breakneck speed, siren shrieking. As he came to the turn-in to the old quarry, his tires screamed and he skidded in and up the rugged path, car bounding over stones, ripping through brush. Suddenly just ahead of him on the path loomed the crane from the new quarry, inching up the road on a caterpillar tractor. Trooper Teliski sprang out of his car and ran past the crane, shouting at the tractor driver.

"To hell with that!" Teliski shouted.

Stumbling and gasping for breath, he raced out into the clearing where hundreds of people waited in a grief-stricken silence for the grappling for bodies to begin.

"Everybody!" Teliski shouted. "Everybody! Listen!" He was half laughing, half strang-

ling for breath. "Your kids aren't there! They're safe! They're all safe—the kids, Jerry Mahoney, everyone! They aren't here. They'll be home before you will! Your kids—" And then he fell forward on his face, sucking in the damp, loam-scented air.

Twenty minutes later Clayton was a madhouse. People running, people driving, people hanging onto the running boards of cars and clinging to bumpers. And in the middle of the town, right opposite the bank, was a station wagon with a yellow school-bus sign on its roof, and children were spilling out of it, waving and shouting at their parents, who laughed and wept. And a handsome young Irishman with bright blue eyes was locked in a tight embrace with Elizabeth Deering.

Haviland's fingers shook slightly as he lit a cigarette. Not yet noon and he was on his second pack.

"You can't see him yet," he said to Jerry Mahoney. "The doctor's with him. In a few minutes."

"I still don't get it," Jerry said. "People thought I had harmed those kids?"

"You don't know what it's been like here," Liz Deering said, clinging tightly to his arm.

Jerry Mahoney turned and saw the newspaper taped over the broken front window, and his face hardened. "Try and tell me, plain and simple, about Pop," he said.

Haviland shook his head, smiling like a man still dazed. "Your pop is an amazing man, Mr. Mahoney," he said. "His mind works in its own peculiar ways . . . The disappearance of the bus affected him differently from some others. He saw it as a magic trick, and he thought of it as a magic trick—or rather, as *part* of a magic trick. He said it to me and I wouldn't listen. He said it is a magician's job to get you to think what he wants you to think and see what he wants you to see. The disappearance of the children, the ghostly faking of their death in the quarry—it meant one thing to your pop, Mr. Mahoney. Someone wanted all the people in Clayton to be out of town. Why?

"There was only one good reason that remarkable pop of yours could think of. The quarry payroll. Nearly a hundred thousand dollars in cash, and not a soul in town to protect it. Everyone would be looking for the children, and all the bandits had to do was walk in the bank and take the money. No cops, no nothing to interfere with them."

"But why didn't Pop tell you his idea?" Jerry asked.

"You still don't know what it was like here, Mr. Mahoney," Haviland said. "People thought you had done something to those kids; they imagined your pop knew something about it. If he'd told his story, even to me, I think I'd have thought he was either touched in the head or covering up. So he kept still—although he did throw me a couple of hints. And suddenly, he was, to all intents and purposes, alone in the town. So he went upstairs, got dressed in those cowboy clothes, and went, calm as you please, to the bank to meet the bandits he knew must be coming. And they came."

"But why the cowboy suit?" Liz Deering asked.

"A strange and wonderful mind," Haviland said. "He thought the sight of him would be screwy enough to throw the bandits off balance. He thought if he started blasting away with his guns they might panic. They almost did."

"What I don't understand," Liz said, "is how, when he fired straight at them, he never hit anybody!"

"Those were stage guns—prop guns," Jerry said. "They only fire blanks."

Haviland nodded. "He thought he could get them to

drop their own guns and then he'd have a real weapon and have the drop on them. It almost worked. But the one man who'd ducked around the corner of the building got a clean shot at him. Fortunately, I arrived at exactly the same minute, and I had them from behind."

"But how did you happen to turn up?" Jerry asked.

"I couldn't get your father out of my mind," Haviland said. "He seemed to know what was going to happen. He said they'd be searching for the kids, whether I told them to wait at home or not. Suddenly I had to know why he'd said that."

"Thank God," Jerry said. "I gather you got them to tell you where we were?"

Haviland nodded. "I'm still not clear how it worked, Jerry."

"It was as simple as pie a la mode," Jerry said. "I was about a half mile into the dugway on the home trip with the kids. We'd just passed Karl Dickler headed the other way when a big trailer truck loomed up ahead of me on the road. It was stopped, and a couple of guys were standing around the tail end of it.

"Broken down, I thought. I pulled up. All of a sudden guns were pointed at me and the kids. They didn't talk much.

They just said to do as I was told. They opened the back of the big truck and rolled out a ramp. Then I was ordered to drive the station wagon right up into the body of the truck. I might have tried to make a break for it except for the kids. I drove up into the truck, they closed up the rear end, and that was that. They drove off with us—right through the main street of town here!

"Not ten minutes later," Jerry went on, "they pulled into that big deserted barn on the Haskell place. We've been shut up there ever since. They were real decent to the kids—hot dogs, soda, ice cream.

"So we just waited there, not knowing why, but nobody hurt, and the kids not as scared as you might think," Jerry laughed. "Oh, we came out of the dugway all right—and right by everybody in town. But nobody saw us."

The doctor appeared in the doorway. "You can see him for a minute now, Jerry," he said. "I had to give him a pretty strong sedative. Dug the bullet out of his shoulder and it hurt a bit. He's sleepy—but he'll do better if he sees you, I think. Don't stay too long, though."

Jerry bounded up the stairs and into the bedroom where Pat Mahoney lay, his face very pale, his eyes half closed. Jerry

knelt by the bed.

"Pop," he whispered. "You crazy old galoot!"

Pat opened his eyes. "You okay, Jerry?"

"Okay, Pop."

"And the kids?"

"Fine. Not a hair of their heads touched." Jerry reached out and covered Pat's hand with his. "Now look here, Two-Gun Mahoney . . ."

Pat grinned at him. "It was a boffo, Jerry. A real boffo."

"It sure was," Jerry said. He started to speak, but he saw that Pat was looking past him at the silver picture frame on the dresser.

"I told you it'd be all right, honey," Pat whispered. "I told you not to worry about your boy while I was around to take care of him." Then he grinned at Jerry, and his eyes closed and he was asleep.

Jerry tiptoed out of the room to find his own girl.



Rhona Petrie

Such a Long Time After

The man in the Panama hat, Cobb Morris, ex-sergeant and ex-radio operator, had to wait a long time before he could return to the small rocky island of Sardos in the Aegean and take care of the unfinished business that dated back to the war... a beautifully written story with a quality that will haunt you a long time after...

The squat fair man in the Panama hat came down the gangplank with a grip in his hand. Behind him there was a little gap before the next passengers were squeezed from the crazy old tub, as though at this final moment they acknowledged he was different. They overlooked how he had been wedged among them, sharing their clacking tongues, their heat, their sweat, and garlic breaths. He went down apart from them, an outsider, branded by his own silence, his Anglo-Saxon blondness, the closed, city set of his tight features.

It had been the foulest of all the squalid craft at the port, sunk below the waterline, indiscriminately crammed with little voluble dark men, baskets of fruit, drums of olive oil, crates of scraggy chickens, straying goats and sheep, all together in

one class of travel; no berths, no air conditioning, no expected bar and lounge, and unless you brought it yourself, no food or drink. It served only the least known islands where no tourist penetrated, islands that boasted no ruined column or ancient cistern but only bone-white rock that nourished no remarkable crop. Fourteen hours of heaving on an oily sea, threading between indistinguishable islands with names like the Three Musketeers.

Twice he had tried to make the crossing from Piraeus but the island boats were unaccountable. "Sardos, yes. We call at Sardos. Right there and back, isn't it? Starting at six"—although the journey was not featured on any of the steamer boards. And the boat, which finally left after nine, had headed southeast, then swung wide

to port and had tried to land him at Samos.

Back to the shipping office to the shoulder-raising, palm-turning clerk, so accustomed to ravings and abuse that he would stand demurely downcast with his girlish lashes on the fine brown skin of his cheeks and wait till the storm was past. Then a sweet smile and the up-turned palm. More money passing and they'd have another try, find another evil-smelling, seam-bursting boat that claimed to stop at Sardos.

Even now, ashore, he could hardly believe he had arrived. He reached out for a lad by the rail, pulled him hard by the forearm. "Sardos?" he demanded, staring him fiercely in the eyes, daring him to lie. "Sardos, Sardos?"

The boy nodded, laughing. "Sardos." He waved his free arm widely, offering the entire island. "Sardos, yes! Here Sardos."

Nothing was familiar on this side. He would have to cross the island to the southwest, identify the village, and then the single low stone house out on the promontory.

He walked over the cobbles onto loose sand, past the three market stalls with their grubby canvas awnings, to the pension-hotel. There were advertise-

ments on its front walls so overgrown by wild vines that you had to guess half the persuasion they should exercise. The man in the Panama hat flicked aside the curtain of plastic strips and went into the cool stone-flagged gloom.

The room they gave him was at the side, overlooking a tiny courtyard. Beyond were the walls and roofs of houses downhill, and as a backdrop, the sea with distant caïques unmoving under a hazy light.

That was how he would leave, not by the offensive little steamer. He would leave as he had come that other time, silently, by dark, in a hired caïque. If, of course, his mission was successful. He mustn't count too much on that; it was, after all, a long time after.

Not count too much? He sweated as the phrase went again through his mind. What was *too much*? He was risking everything on this, every last penny, every gram of energy, what might be his last throw of luck. It had to come off.

If it didn't... Despite the heat he shivered. When he had slipped away from the tourist party in Athens he had had to leave behind the rest of his tickets with the courier. He had his own passport, but that was no guarantee that the company would see him back later with

another party. It wasn't one of the best agencies. Like himself they traveled on the poverty line. He had held his breath here as he booked in, but being English he had not been expected to pay in advance. It would mean a flit when he'd completed his mission. They'd wait a few days, thinking he was working round the island, before they started to make inquiries, and by then it would be too late. But he must be careful which fisherman he approached to take him off, because here they were all related. Word might get back to the hotel.

He unfastened the suitcase and took out the aerosol DDT, spread the clothes he'd worn over the red-tiled floor, and sprayed along the seams. Already angry red lumps showed on the pale skin of his belly, on the inner side of his upper arms and over his thighs. Still naked, he pulled the bed apart and treated that, but the bolster he flung out on the balcony as being beyond the DDT.

It had not been like this the other time he had come. He was younger then and tougher, and he hadn't yet developed this nettle rash. Now, as soon as he scratched, the large white blisters would come, filling the space between the fleabites with their lumps of fluid and making his whole body aflame

from the roots of his hair to the soles of his feet. It was suffer that or take the capsules that left him a zombie the next day. Even now, through merely thinking of it, the rash had started, symmetrically, on his ribs, spreading first with a flush under his skin, and then with the burning itch. Touch it and the weals started rising while you watched.

It had started in Parkhurst when they'd pulled him in for robbery with violence. Nerves, the M.O. had said. Him, Cobb Morris, with nerves! The judge had known better, sentencing him. Cold-blooded indifference to suffering, he'd accused him of, and the old vulture had been no bleeding heart himself, giving the maximum stretch. He knew himself it wasn't nerves that caused the nettle rash but hate, plain white-cold hate for anyone outside while he was captive like an animal. And now that he himself was outside it had become too much of a habit to leave him. He still couldn't be completely free.

Next morning he was living in slow motion because he had taken the capsules, unable to think or move without an effort out of all proportion to its object. Already there was a crowd of boys at the hotel doorway, because to account for his movements he had given

out that he was an amateur geologist interested in the local rocks. They had brought him specimens of anything that came to hand—stones from the roadway, a chunk of concrete, a dried mud ball, chips from an old fireclay sink. They insisted he should allow them to help.

Persistent as flies, they clung to him until the proprietress sprang from the hotel and roundly scolded them as wastrels and villains of uncertain parentage. Sullenly the boys dispersed. She turned back to him, palms turned outward in explanation. If he truly desired a guide she could supply one, but she could not have the place cheapened by this unclean riffraff. Was not today the very day the Magistrate should come and must he not be assured that the hotel was as seemly and respectable as ever? Then she was away herself to make all ready for her honored guest.

By dint of gestures and stamps and pointing the passage of the sun into the west he managed to hire a donkey for the day. It took his precious *drachmae* but would simplify and shorten his quest; also the beast was necessary to carry back his canvas bag of specimens. They were his badge of office, his pledge of respectability.

The island, he recalled, was

little more than a mile wide here, almost rectangular, and lying roughly NE-SW. The point he sought was at the far end, some seven miles as the crow flew. He planned to reach it today by the southern and western route, tomorrow by the northern and western, and work his way slowly there, tapping at rocks with his little hammer, examining strata with his magnifying lens, making important-looking jottings in his notebook. For he knew he would be watched by unseen observers; he knew the suspicious curiosity of these people.

When they were finally accustomed to what he did they would lose interest. Lazily, at noon heat, they would assume he always did the same—tapping, examining, noting down. They would sleep through the haze of midday, pitying the mad stranger who worked on through it. So, in privacy, he would achieve what he had come to do.

At shortly before five o'clock he trained his glasses westward and saw the once-familiar configuration of the cliffs, in profile like a shoulder extending into muscled upper arm and elbow. The elbow leaned some eighty feet over the sea. Above it, but just below the dark fuzz of olive trees, should be the house. Surely

from here it would show, standing out black against the gold-lit water. He moved the glasses again over the length of the outline, readjusted them. The house, he now saw, was gone.

Well, that should not surprise him. After they had been taken off and their mission completed, someone would have had to pay for it. The Germans were not ones to lie down and weep. There would have been hostages shot, houses leveled, churches burned with the women driven inside. The Nazis had always known how to discipline peasants. It was mad of him to have supposed for a second that the woman and the child could have possibly survived.

He collected his instruments and packed them, with the unlikely-looking specimens, the pencil and notebook, into the canvas sack, tied the sack to the saddle, mounted and urged the beast down into the valley. There were mosquitoes that rose from the aromatic herbage which sprang back from the donkey's lifted hooves as though the stiff, writhing stems reached out to trip them. Then the beast was scrabbling upward again on rock, and looking back he saw the trap channels where the islanders caught the seawater to run onto the salt pans.

Then he was compelled to

dismount and hold the donkey's head, continuing upward on foot and dragging the unwilling, lathered animal after him. And at last he was there—a hundred feet above the flat and inky sea of the bay where they had first come ashore. He began to remember in detail . . .

The lights went on leading us in—two long flashes and a short one at intervals of two minutes. We had swum the last hundred yards, towing the raft with our provisions. When all was unloaded and the corporal had been sent to bury the explosives at the store point, the major gave the line three sharp tugs and the raft started away again, back to the caique. Before our eyes the boat began to melt into the darkness.

The man who had guided us in shouldered a pack of the stores and jerked his thumb for us to follow. We picked our way up in silence to the cliff's top, then lay and wriggled on our bellies to the house's open door. When we were in the guide closed and barred the door, set a match to the oil light, and reached out for our hands.

"You've no idea," he told us, "how glad I am to see you!" Captain Ross, Greek scholar and dreamer, sent here by Intelligence to check on the enemy's seaplane base, with his head full

of Heroes and ancient gods and incestuous kings and tyrants.

Across the bare table, as though flattened to the wall by it, sat the woman and the small child with their great dark eyes fixed on us as though they were starved and could eat us whole that way. We looked at each other, the R.E. major and corporal, and me a sergeant as radio operator, and we all thought what a bloody place and a bloody job and a bloody poor hope there was of ever getting back from it alive.

The woman was hard, a girl brought here from Corfu, a real island, not a half-barren rock like this. Her husband, a fisherman, had been machine-gunned in his boat. She had no cause to love the Germans for that, and she had scant sympathy for her husband's neighbors. She felt herself superior and kept apart. There were men who came out from the village now and then, but she had no need of them, only of their money or of the food they brought.

She existed on fish and the rough barley bread she baked herself, dipped in olive oil and sprinkled with salt. She had figs and goats' milk and sometimes there was a coarse red wine. We taught her to like bully beef and biscuits. She made a sort of hash of them with oil and bitter

herbs. The child would eat that until his little stomach swelled and his eyes grew smaller and we lifted him, unconscious, from the table to where he slept with his mother and the captain in the hay. We others lay above them on the flat roof, and above us were only the stars and the occasional homing sea-plane.

When a villager came he could be seen from afar by the watcher on the roof and the sign was given. We'd drop the rope end and Captain Ross would climb up hand over hand. Not the child, though. (Spiro his name was, because his mother was from Corfu and she had called him after its saint.) The villagers were accustomed to the child being there and if we'd hauled him up with us it would have been a reminder that there was alternative company for him. Ross said the villagers knew all about us but preferred to turn blind eyes.

I hadn't believed this until the night I went with Ross and the major down to the village. We had barely slid past the first house when a boy appeared beside us. "*Tedesci*," he whispered and waved us away.

Ross pulled us off the street and took us to the back of the church. It was a small squat building of old stone with a dome for lid. A figure stood in

the doorway, dark and top-heavy with the oversized priest's headdress. He gave a sudden sharp glance and then looked straight through us. He put out a hand and pushed the door ajar even as he moved aside, coming past us and down to the street.

"Look lively," ordered Ross and we dived inside the building. By the glow of hanging lamps we moved toward the altar. I have never forgotten the major's eyes when he saw it, the hot little pig eyes and the greed flaring in them. That was what first made me realize the value of the junk there—the elaborate gold cross and the primitive icon. Ross went on about it, as he always did, admiring anything ancient, everything Greek. But it was the major's eyes that really told me it was something worth having.

We stayed there almost an hour and then another man came, signaled to Ross and told him in Greek, "It is safe now. They are drinking." As we left the village, singing and drunken laughter reached us through the moonless dark . . .

The man in the Panama hat started awake. The length of the shadows made him reach for his watch; two hours had passed since he mounted the headland. Time now to be head-

ing back to the port and its crummy little hotel, all flies and garlic. The donkey was a dozen yards off, its trailing reins tangled in the giant thistles.

They traveled directly this time, using the central dust trail that served as road for the length of the island. He went through the village whose name he had never known and came to the church. It was not the same, or even where the earlier one had stood. Gazing around, he saw now that none of the neighboring houses was old. Except for the first and last houses of the village, everything had been built since the war. They had suffered, then, for the major's successes. Perhaps there was no one left who might still remember the young Sergeant Cobb Morris.

Next morning he arose early, determined to complete the second route in time to spend a few hours in the wide bay in front of the one where he had come ashore the first time. This was where the German sea-planes had been moored. A metal stairway had been fitted to the cliff, giving access at the top to the old olive-oil factory. Here repairs were carried out, and Luftwaffe personnel camped in nearby huts. In the olive groves of the surrounding slopes were stacked drums of fuel, ammunition, and unfused

bombs. This was the area to which the major's orders had referred.

Of the old factory nothing now remained, and the olive groves had shifted; but sweeping his glasses from north to west he caught a glimpse of smoke rising and beneath it, in a little hollow, a glint of glass or metal. Here then was the new factory that provided the main industry of the new village with the modern church.

Cobb Morris turned to the sea again and followed the cliff to the bay of the seaplanes. The water lay untroubled by engine or human life. The moorings no longer existed and he looked in vain for the iron stairway that had led down to the shore. At last his field glasses fixed on unnatural details on the ancient rock, dark crags that might be twisted staples, the remains of a handrail tortured by explosion and infernal heat.

It seemed that the major had known his job well. (Or had the islanders, once the enemy was gone, been determined to eradicate every trace of the shameful occupation?)

Once more he saw the stout tense figure of the explosives expert, small hot eyes in greedy enjoyment of the little church's treasure. And where was that treasure now? A pulse beat in

his throat as he asked the question he had not before dared to face. He felt the crimson stain of irritation pass under his skin and then the weals begin to rise, equal to the excitement in his mind; but he could not take the capsules now, so near to knowing if his mission was in vain.

Savagely he tugged the donkey's head inland, turning it into the trail that would lead past the new factory and down to the new village. His hands trembled as he stumbled from the donkey, tied its reins to a hitching ring, and then walked up the marble flags to the entrance porch. Inside, the church was cool and hazy with incense. There was an old priest there and a group of young boys moving between the pillars.

The man clasped his Panama hat tight against his straining chest and turned to the altar. Involuntarily a great breath of relief burst from him. The altar was topped with a simple cross of some pale polished wood like sycamore, and no matter how he turned to peer, the primitive old icon was nowhere to be seen. Safe then, the treasure—still safe where he had buried it!

He rode back slowly to the pension-hotel, willing his mind to be patient and wait another day. What was one day more, such a long time after?

At the hotel he was present-

ed to the guest of honor, the Magistrate—a tall grave man with gentle dark eyes. Captain Ross, thought Morris, would have seen him as a classic dreamer, a philosopher-king, Homer treading the path of his Heroes. What could bring this distinguished man from Athens to holiday alone on this miserable rock? And to come year after year! Once he himself had found what he came for, he would shake the dust from his shoes, set sail for the mainland, and not see Greece, the Aegean, Europe any more.

The local wine was coarse on his throat, sour on his stomach. He tossed on the hard narrow bed, cursed through nightmares and eternally seeking what he could not remember. When dawn lit the window he was weary and ill-tempered, his skin aflame round the white lumps of his nettle rash.

He took capsules with his coffee and as he went for the donkey he could feel his movements slowing, his mind becoming heavy and dull. He saw himself like the peasants around him, sloppy and unclean and brutishly stupid. He felt he would never get free of them or their stinking island. He imagined what it would be to stay here for the rest of one's life.

That was what Ross, the stupid Grecophile, had wanted.

Probably he'd had it, too. If he and the major hadn't been blown up in their own firework display, the Germans must have got them. Ross would have ended his life as he'd wished, here on Sardos.

Today Morris chose more carefully the stones for his collection, throwing out those which had no interesting lines of color. He remembered now what Ross had said about the island's name—that it might be a corruption of *sadios*, an onyx with layers of white and yellow. Strange how today Ross was so often in his mind, like a ghost from a long time back.

Morris went this time directly, by the road and through the village, to the spur where the house had once been. And this time, kicking among the roots of wild sage and heath, he came upon flat stones, the foundations of a building. He stood on the spot where they all had lived, with the woman and the child Spiro. He did not know her name, had never heard it spoken. She was always "the woman." Too much the woman, in fact. That was what had set that fool Greek amok, thinking of the woman here every night with Ross while he skulked in the village and must wait and take his turn in walking out here.

He had not gone to the

Germans with his story. That was not the islanders' way. They cherished their hates secretly, nurtured them into great bloody passions that only death could satisfy. That is why he had filched that drum of petrol from the Germans' dump, doctored it, and sent it on its mad career down the hill from the olive trees. Not caring if he lost the woman, too . . .

The major was on watch on the roof. We heard his sudden cry as we sat at cards round the table. It was the corporal who got out through the door first and we scarcely knew the danger before he had raced to the bouncing object, scooped it up, and staggered away through the scrub on the side of the hill, down toward the sea. We saw him stumble, rolling with the drum over and over to the rocks below, and then the night burst into sudden day as the thing exploded.

The very hill shook with the thud of the bomb burst, and soon after came the roar of Volkswagens, voices shouting, and the slather of boots on rock. The major would not let us run inland. Sweating, we all three lay flat on the roof while the woman and Spiro ran down to the Germans, shouting in alarm, demanding protection, begging them to leave a guard at

the lonely house. There were the officers' voices below us and then we smelled the bitter aroma of the ersatz coffee she made from stolen barley, winnowed and slowly roasted. A patrol returned from the beach to report on the explosion. There had been nothing left to show he was anything more than a Greek. A dark boy, the corporal had been. His name was Evans.

They had reacted quickly in the village. Even before the Germans returned there, they had guessed and judged and executed. It was the Greek's body that they threw at the Luftwaffe officers' feet, for then he could tell no story at variance with their own. This one had plotted with the other who had blown himself up. A watcher had seen them go that night to the olive grove. They found a hole cut in the wire where the villains must have broken through to bring disgrace and dishonor on their village. The Germans had accepted the version they offered. After a pause of four days the three of us remaining breathed freely and went on with our plans for destroying the base.

On the night before the attempt I sent a prearranged signal on my transmitter. We received the go-ahead. We were to be picked up at 1:00 a.m. at the

spot where we had landed. I passed this message to the major and he confirmed my orders—to remain at the house and contact the landing party. Ross was taking over the corporal's function; the scheme needed two men at least.

As soon as dark fell on the night of the plan, the major and Ross disappeared. I sent off an OK signal on the selected wavelength and then disappeared myself. I had a private scheme of my own. By midnight it was completed and the church treasure buried deep in a recess I'd found in the cliff near the house. Then, as ordered, I went down to the shore to contact our transport.

It didn't all go as planned. Something misfired and jumped the gun. At 12:40 there was a single explosion and fire swept down the hill to the factory. When that was going nicely all hell broke loose down by the seaplanes. The whole island shook and flames blotted out the stars. By then I was aboard the British submarine and saw it all by periscope.

The rubber dinghy had gone back for the other two and although we lay offshore till first light it never returned. In his log the commander wrote, "Two passengers did not report on board. Dinghy and CPO Hal-liday lost." . . .

Cobb Morris removed his Panama hat and wiped from his brow the sweat that had gathered in the groove the hat had left. The sun whirled, a disc of white light almost above him. Noon and everyone asleep. No sound came up from the factory in the hollow where the workers had crept away to rest under the trees. No one would see when he went to locate his treasure.

The little trowel he used for digging out his specimen stones was quite inadequate. There had been a rockfall and the cliff face here was covered for a distance of twenty yards, to a height of over ten. If he was to uncover his hiding place he must lift the rocks by hand and drop each in turn down into the sea.

The sun moved on and he knew there might be men on the cliff by now, curiously looking down on his frantic burrowings. Even the caiques out to sea could be full of eyes that followed each movement as he bent and staggered and straightened, a dark fly moving on the rock face.

But he no longer controlled his own actions. He was moved by the power of greed and the memory of riches. He had to know if the canister was still there. It was a drum that had come ashore with them. As the

supplies were used, Morris was detailed to get rid of the containers in the sea, weighted down with rocks. But this one he had brought here, had excavated the recess, and fitted it in deep to await the dismantled loot. He knew it would be impossible to smuggle such bulk aboard any craft the Navy would provide to take them off, but he could always come back for it later. He hadn't intended it to be as long a time after as this, but there had been no chance during the war and then for some years he'd buried it under more immediate get-rich-quick plans.

When at last he had come out of Parkhurst, the newspapers were full of the cylinders just found in the sand at Weston-super-Mare. They had lain undisturbed since the end of the war, the forgotten brain-children of some forgotten technical expert. The bomb-disposal squad had had to float them out to open water, sink them deep, and then explode them all. It was reading this that brought Morris' mind back to the cylinder he had himself buried so long ago, in the less frequented Aegean.

He went on lifting, carrying, dropping, and now there was a fragment of stone he seemed to remember, a yellowish rhomboid flat as a slab of slate.

His hands trembled and he tore at the stones beside it, unconscious of his split and bleeding fingers. The westering sun reflected on metal, dull and green-painted. His breath sobbed in his throat as he scrambled at the rocks packed on either side of the hole.

Then suddenly they were free and he saw the signs he had once scratched on to identify the drum. Such a long time after, and it was still there!

He knew he should now pack the stones back across the secret and return to the hotel at the port, but restraint was impossible now that he had gone so far. He went on pulling at the close-packed stones while the sweat ran into his eyes, although the sun had now passed beyond the elbow of rock and the air should have felt cooler.

At length he placed his palms flat on each side of the cylinder and drew it slowly toward him. The farther rim came clear of the gap and as he swung the drum down to stand it on the ledge, the change of axis was marked by a definite click.

It flooded over him, a distant memory as a raw recruit ... his RSM's lecture on booby traps. "If anything clicks when you touch it, run!—if it's not too late!"

Fast as the thought came, he knew he *was* too late. He had come, he realized, far too long a time after . . .

The Magistrate rode down to the new village on the stiff black mare they had been offering him for years. They were poor on the island but for this they would not take payment. When at last she lay down and died they would commandeer another and offer that, from the island to its most respected visitor.

He came into the village and dismounted by the new pale church. Father Stephanides, who had been expecting him, came hobbling down the marble flagstones. The Magistrate read the question in the old priest's eyes and looked to the sea.

"You saw him at the pension?" the priest insisted.

The Magistrate nodded. "It was the same one. I would have known him no matter how long after."

"It is justice," said the priest, but his voice rose as though he questioned what he stated.

"We killed him," said the Magistrate, "we of Sardos. Had it not been for him the treasure would have been blasted to pieces with the church. We should remember that he saved the island. Because of him we

were able to build again."

"It is done now. It was all decided long ago."

The Magistrate drew his gaze from the sea and from the distant cliff which, in profile, had until this day stretched like an elbow to the water. He looked into the little black eyes of the priest, deep-set in the questioning gray-bearded face. *I do not know*, he answered them, without speaking; *I do not know if we must forever go on punishing.*

"Spiro, my son, go in peace," the priest told him. They touched hands and the Magistrate remounted.

All the way back, as he rode, he remembered. *I remember too well*, he told himself, *even such a long time after.* He remembered the four Englishmen who had come under his mother's roof; the tall calm captain he had loved like a father; the major of the lusting eyes; the corporal who had died to save them; the cold squat sergeant who had lived on until today.

He had known when they were about to leave. All the village had known and watched them, ready to flee themselves as soon as danger was unleashed. Already they were moving out as the major and captain stole off with the charges. For himself he had been instructed to follow the

sergeant. This was the one the village most feared. And with what reason!

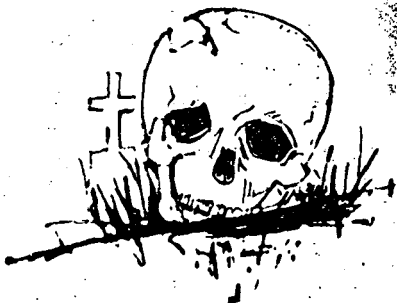
Spiro had seen and marked where the sergeant had buried the holy treasure that he looted from the church. The priest, when he had told him, had allowed it to remain where it was hidden, and had taken the child and his mother with him when he sailed in secret for Cyprus. There they had stayed until the Germans withdrew. The treasure had been sold at last to rebuild the village which the enemy had razed. It had built, too, the beautiful new church. Spiro, at the priesthood's expense, had been sent to the mainland and educated in Athens. But he had not returned to Sardos in their black robes; instead he had turned to the Law, more concerned with man's justice than God's.

Now, by man's law, a mur-

der had been committed. And he himself was the only witness. Having so perfect a memory of his return from Cyprus, he knew who had been charged with reclosing the recess in the cliff after the treasure's recovery. It was Antoniades, a silent and grieving man, twin brother to that one who had sent the other drum bouncing down the hill from the olive trees.

The Magistrate turned the mare's head and looked back. The house was no longer there, or even the cliff where it once had stood. So many men were dead since this was begun...

With sudden impatience he swung the mare back on its homeward path. He was weary of the affair and of the Law's minute vendettas. The place was gone, the victims were gone, and none remained now to require a judgment of him. It was, indeed, such a long time after.



Ellery Queen

Mum Is the Word

It began with a double celebration—the birth of the New Year and the 70th birthday of Godfrey Mumford, famous throughout the horticultural world as a breeder of chrysanthemums. But happy as the double occasion was, there were ominous, deeply disturbing overtones.

If only the others had known, they might have been forewarned . . . For Ellery had come back to Wrightsville—one of his spur-of-the-moment visits to the town he loved so much, to the New England town where he had experienced some of his greatest triumphs—and greatest failures; and it was no secret (especially to Chief of Police Newby) that Ellery Queen was Wrightsville's perennial jinx. Whenever Ellery came to Wrightsville, evil came out of its hiding place . . .

The Chrysanthemum Case proved no exception. Indeed, it proved to be one of the most perplexing mysteries in Ellery's career—a crime whose investigation made the "great detective" think he was Ellery in Blunderland; and to add the ultimate grotesquerie, the case offered the "last word" in bizarre and fantastic clues, the "last word" in baffling and frustrating "dying messages" . . . A short novel, complete in this anthology . . .

Detective: ELLERY QUEEN

December 31, 1964 The Wrightsville with certain overtones not in the tradition. and the old man became a fact. Indeed, in accepting the offerings of his family and his friends, old Godfrey would have been well advised to recall the warning against gift-bearing

Greeks (although there had never been a Greek in Wrightsville, at least none of Godfrey's acquaintance; the nearest to one had been Andy Birobatyan, the florist who was of Armenian descent; Andy had shared the celebrated Mumford green thumb until the usual act of God had severed it).

The first Greek to come forward with her gift was Ellen Mumford Nash. Having gone through three American husbands, Godfrey's daughter had just returned from England, where she was in the fifth year of a record run with number four, an Egyptologist connected with the British Museum—the prodigal daughter home for a visit, her nostrils flaring as if she smelled something unpleasant.

Nevertheless, Ellen said sweetly to her father, "Much happiness, darling. I do hope you find these useful."

As it developed, the hope was extravagant. Her gift to him was a gold-plated cigarette case and lighter. Godfrey Mumford had given up smoking in 1952.

Christopher's turn came next. A little less than 30 years before, Christopher had followed Ellen into the world by a little less than 30 minutes. (Their father had never allowed himself to be embittered by the fact that their birth had killed their mother, although he had

had occasional reason to reflect on the poor exchange.)

Ellen, observing her twin over the champagne they were all sharing, was amused by his performance. How well he did the loving-son bit! With such talent it seemed remarkable that dear Chris had never risen above summer stock and walk-ons off Broadway. The reason, of course, was that he had never worked very hard at his chosen profession; but then he had never worked very hard at anything.

"A real swinger of a birthday, father," Christopher was saying with passionate fondness. "And a hundred more to come."

"I'll settle for one at a time, son. Thanks very much." Godfrey's hair was gray but still vigorous; his big body tended toward gauntness now, but after 70 years he carried himself straight as a dancer. He was examining a silver-handled walking stick. "It's really handsome."

Christopher sidled stage right, smiling sincerely; and Godfrey set the stick aside and turned to the middle-aged woman standing by. She was small, on the dumpling side; the hands holding the gift had the stub nails and rough skin of habitual housework. Her face under the snowy hair lay quiet

as a New England winter garden.

"You shouldn't have gone to all this trouble, Mum," the old man protested, "with the work you have to do around here."

"Goodness, Godfrey, it was no trouble. I wish it could have been more."

"I'm trying to remember the last time I had a hand-knit sweater." Godfrey's voice was gruff as he fingered it. "It's just what I need to wear to the greenhouse these days. When on earth did you find the time?"

The sun came through to shine on the garden. "It's not very elegant, Godfrey, but it will keep you warm."

It was 28 years since Margaret Caswell had come to Wrightsville to nurse her sister Louise—Godfrey's wife—in Louise's fatal illness. In that time she had brought into the world a child of her own, buried her husband, become "Mum" to the three children growing up in the household—Godfrey's two and her one—and planned (she had recently figured it out) more than 30,000 meals. Well, Godfrey Mumford had earned her devotion; he had been a second father to her child.

She sometimes felt that Godfrey loved her Joanne more than his own twins; she felt it now, in the drawing room. For

Godfrey was holding in his hands a leather desk set decorated with gold-leaf chrysanthemums, and his shrewd blue eyes were glittering like January ice. The set was the gift of Joanne, who was watching him with a smile.

"You're uncanny, Jo," Godfrey said. "It's taking advantage of an old man. This is beautiful."

Jo's smile turned to laughter. "With most men it's supposed to be done with steak and potatoes. You're a pushover for chrysanthemums. It's very simple."

"I suppose people think I'm very simple. A senile delinquent," Godfrey said softly.

A frail little man with a heavy crop of eyebrows above very bright eyes hooted at this. He was Godfrey Mumford's oldest friend, Wolcott Thorp, who had formerly taught anthropology at Merrimac University in Connhaven. For the past few years Thorp had been serving as curator of the Merrimac University Museum, where he had been developing his special interest, the cultural anthropology of West Africa.

"I'll contribute to your delinquency, too," Wolcott Thorp chuckled. "Here's something, Godfrey, that will help you waste your declining years."

"Why, it's a first edition of an Eighteenth Century work on mums!" Godfrey devoured the title page. "Wolcott, this is magnificent."

The old man clutched the tome. Only Jo Caswell sensed the weariness in his big body. To Wrightsville and the horticultural world he was the breeder of the celebrated Mumford's Majestic Mum, a double bloom on a single stem; he was a member of the Chrysanthemum Society of America and of chrysanthemum clubs in England, France, and Japan; his correspondence with fellow breeders and aficionados encompassed the globe. To Jo he was a gentle, kind, and troubled man, and he was dear to her heart.

"I'm grateful for all these kindnesses," Godfrey Mumford said. "It's a pity my response has to be to give you bad news. It's the wrong occasion, but I don't know when I'll have you all together under this roof again. Forgive me for what I'm about to tell you."

His daughter Ellen had an instinct for the quality and degree of trouble. By the flare of her nostrils she had sensed that what was coming was bad news indeed.

"Father—" she began.

But her father stopped her. "Let me tell this without

interruption, Ellen. It's hard enough... When I retired in 1954, my estate was worth about five million dollars; the distribution in my will was based on that figure. Since that time, as you all know, I've pretty well neglected everything else in experimenting with the blending and hybridizing of mums."

Godfrey paused, took a deep breath. "I recently found out that I'm a fool. Or maybe it was fated. Anyway, the result is the same."

He glanced at the old book in his hands as if surprised to find it still there. Then he set it carefully on the coffee table and sat down on the crewel-fringed couch.

"I had put all my financial affairs in the hands of Truslow Addison's law firm. Where I made my mistake was in sticking with the status quo when Tru died and his son took over the practice. I should have known better. You remember, Christopher, what a wild youngster Tru Junior was—"

"Yes," said Christopher Mumford. "Father, you don't mean—"

"I'm afraid so," the old man said. "After young Tru died in that auto accident last May, the affairs of the law firm were found to be like a basket of broken eggs. You couldn't even

make an omelet of them. Some of the funds in his trust he had simply gambled away; the rest vanished because of bad business judgment, stupid speculations, investments without rhyme or reason . . .”

His voice trailed away, and after a while the silence was cracked by the voice of Ellen Mumford Nash. Her slim and elegant figure was stiff with outrage.

“Are you saying, father, that you’re without a *shilling*?”

Behind her Christopher made an abrupt move, extending his arm in a sort of forensic gesture, as if he were trying to argue away a legal point that threatened his whole case.

“You’re joking, Father. It can’t be that bad. There’s got to be something left out of so much loot.”

“Hear me out,” his father said heavily. “By liquidating assets I’ve managed to pay off all the creditors. This house and the property are mortgaged; there’s not very much equity. I have an old annuity that will let Mum and Joanne and me live here decently, but on my death the income from it stops. I’ll have to cut down my mums operation—”

Ellen broke in, bitter as the cold outside. “Damn your mums! If you’d stuck to growing seeds, the way you

started, Father, none of this would have happened. Left without a farthing! After all these years.”

Godfrey had gone pale at her curse; otherwise his face showed nothing. He had apparently prepared himself well for the ordeal. “Your brother was right in one respect, Ellen. There is something valuable left—something that no one’s known about. I want to show it to you.”

Mumford rose and went over to the wall behind him. He pushed aside an oil painting of a vaseful of chrysanthemums, exposing a square-doored wall safe. His silent audience heard the faint clicking—more like a swishing—of a dial. He removed something, shut the door of the safe, and came back.

Ellen’s breath came out in a whinny.

Her father’s hand was holding up a magnificent pendant.

“You’ll recall,” the old man said, “that on my retirement I took a trip to the Far East to bone up on Oriental mums. Well, while I was in Japan I managed to get my hands on this beauty. I paid nowhere near what it’s worth, although it cost me a lot of money. How could I pass this up? There are records authenticating it as a royal gift from the Emperor

Komei, father of Meiji. It's known as the Imperial Pendant."

The gold links of the chain were exquisitely carved in the shape of tiny, intricate chrysanthemums; the pendant itself was a chrysanthemum, with an enormous diamond in the center surrounded by sixteen diamond petals. The superb gems, deep yellow in color, gathered the light in the room and cast it back in a shattering explosion.

"These stones are perfectly matched. The Emperor's agents searched the world to find enough of these rare yellow diamonds to complete the pendant. As a group, they're unique."

Ellen Nash's eyes, as hard as the gems, became slitted. She had never heard of Emperor Komei or the Imperial Pendant, but she was not invulnerable to beauty, especially when it had a high market value.

"Father, that must be worth a fortune."

"Believe it or not, it's been appraised at a million dollars." There was an arpeggio of gasps; and the warmth in Godfrey Mumford's voice expired, as if his pleasure had been chilled suddenly. "Well, you've seen it, so I'll put it back in the safe."

"For God's sake, Father," cried Christopher, "not in a

dinky little home safe! Why don't you put it in a bank vault?"

"Because I like to take it out every once in a while and look at it, son. I've had it here for a long time, and no one's stolen it yet. By the way, I'm the only one who knows the combination of the safe. I suppose I ought to leave a record of it—in case anything happens to me."

"I should think so!" said Ellen.

Godfrey's expression did not change. "I'll take care of it, Ellen."

He returned to the wall safe. When he faced them again, the painting hung in place and his hands were empty.

"So there's what's left of my estate," he said. "A piece of historic jewelry worth a million dollars." His fine face saddened now, as if he had reached the limit of self-discipline. "Wolcott, my old will included a bequest to you of a hundred thousand dollars to finance that expedition to West Africa you've always talked about."

"I know, Godfrey, I know," said Thorp.

"Now, when I die, I'm afraid your legacy will be only one-fifth that."

Wolcott Thorp made a face. "I'm getting too old for expeditions. Do we have to talk

about these things?"

He said this in a mutter, as if the whole subject were painful to him. Godfrey Mumford turned mercifully to Margaret Caswell.

"Mum, I originally planned a bequest to you and Joanne of a quarter of a million dollar trust fund. Well, I'm not going to make you suffer for my mistake after giving me half your lifetime, at least any more than I can help. The inheritance tax will cut down the pie, but my new will takes ample care of you in a revised trust. I wanted you and Jo to know that."

He turned to Ellen and Christopher. "What's left, of course, will go to you children share and share alike. It isn't what I'd planned, and I know it won't be what you expected, but you'll have to make the best of it. I'm sorry."

"So," said Ellen with a little snap of her jaws, "am I."

"Oh, shut up, Ellen," her brother said.

And there was a silence.

It was broken by Joanne. "Well! Shall we drink a toast to the birthday boy?" And she made for the rest of the champagne she had ordered from Dunc MacLean in the Square (which was round), in High Village, leaving behind her a definitely dismal New Year's Eve party.

January 1, 1965 Christopher Mumford was suffering from an unfamiliar malady—some sort of malfunction of the glands, as he diagnosed it. His mood had changed overnight. He gulped a mouthful of air as cold and clean and heady as Joanne's night-before champagne, and blew it out with a happy snort, like a horse. Even the thought of his many creditors failed to depress him.

"What a scrumbumptious day!" he exulted. "What an absolutely virgin way to start the year! Let's mosey on up to the woods beyond the greenhouse. I'll race you, Jo—what do you say?"

Joanne giggled. "Don't be a chump. You'd fall flat on your tunkus after twenty yards. You're in pitiful physical condition, Chris, and you know it. Dissipated is what."

"You're right, of course. As dissipated as father's estate," said Christopher cheerfully.

"You could still repair the damage."

"Gyms make me dizzy. No, it's hopeless."

"Nothing is hopeless unless you make it so."

"Beware! Little Coz is mounting her pulpit! I warn you, Jo, for some ridiculous reason I'm higher than the Mahoganies this morning. You simply can't spoil it."

"I don't want to. I *like* to see you happy. It's such a welcome change."

"Right again. In pursuance whereof, and since New Year's Day is the time for resolutions, I hereby resolve to restrict my coffin-nail intake, ration my poison-slipping, and consort only with incorruptible virgins, starting with you."

"How do you know I'm, well, incorruptible?"

"By me you are," said Christopher. "I ought to know. I've tried enough times."

"And that's a fact," said Jo in a rather grim tone. But then she laughed, and he laughed, too.

They skirted the big glass-house, whose panes cast into the hard bright air a fireworks of sparks, and went on across a carpet of dead grass toward a noble stand of evergreens.

Christopher was happily conscious of Joanne beside him. Her stride was long and free, a no-nonsense sort of locomotion that managed to emphasize her secondary sex characteristics, which were notable. And not even the wool stockings and the thick-soled walking shoes could spoil as captivating a pair of legs as his connoisseur's eye had ever studied.

"You implied that I'm different when I'm happy," Christopher said.

"You certainly are."

"Well, I've been feeling different this morning, and I couldn't figure it. Now I can. I'm not different—I'm the same old rounder I've always been. What I am is, I'm responding to a fresh stimulus. You, Cousin. You spell the difference."

"Thank you, sir," said Jo.

"Oh, before this I've gone through the battlefield maneuvers with you, but I didn't actually *notice* you. You know what I mean?"

"I'm getting a clue," said Jo warily.

"But now I *am*. I mean I'm noticing *you*, Cousin. In the aggregate, as it were, not merely here and there. Am I communicating? What does it mean?"

"It means you're bored, and you've decided to make a little time to while away your boredom."

"Not at all. Suddenly you've turned into a marvelously desirable piece of goods."

"And you're the susceptible buyer."

"Not the way you mean. You forget that I make my way boards-treading. I'm used to desirable women—the theater is lousy with them. So much so that I've been in danger of turning monk."

"Then why are you tickling my hand?"

"Because I've decided against celibacy. With your permission I'll go further. I'll put my arm around you."

"Permission denied. I've been through *that* maneuver before with you, and it leads to a major battle. We'll sit here on this log for a while and rest. Then we'll go back."

They sat. It was cold. They sat closer—for warmth, Joanne told herself.

"Gosh, it's wonderful," breathed Christopher in little puffs, like smoke.

"What's wonderful?"

"How things change. When we were kids I thought you were the world's biggest stinker."

"I couldn't stand you, either. There are times when I still can't. Like last night."

"Last night? Why, I was a model of deportment!"

"You don't know your father well, do you?"

"Father? As well as anybody."

"Your gift to him didn't show it. Nor Ellen's—Uncle Godfrey hasn't smoked in years. And you gave him a cane, for heaven's sake! Don't you realize Uncle Godfrey's too proud to use a cane? He'd never admit dependence that way."

Christopher Mumford had to admit to himself that her indictment was justified. He

had bought the walking stick (on credit) without any real consideration of his father's needs or wants.

"You're right," he sighed. "What with handling father's correspondence and puttering around after him in the greenhouse; you've come to know him better than his own children."

They went on sitting on the log and holding hands. Jo had to hold his hands very firmly.

January 3 Breakfast was not a ritual at the Mumfords', but a certain deference was customarily shown to the head of the house. Family and guests, barring illness or improbably late hours the night before, were encouraged to present themselves promptly at 9:00, which was the time Godfrey Mumford invariably appeared.

Christopher, still floating in his euphoria, came downstairs a good 20 minutes ahead of schedule. He was astonished to find his distaff counterpart in the breakfast room before him. Ellen, the one member of the family traditionally AWOL from the morning meal, on this morning was lounging in a spot of sunshine with a cup of Margaret Caswell's rich coffee in her hand.

"I knew it, I knew it,"

Christopher said. "A day for miracles. Imagine finding you on your feet at this proletarian hour."

Ellen glared at him through the aromatic steam. "What makes you so cheerful of late? It's disgusting."

"Something rare has entered my life. As the ecclesiastical arm puts it, I have been uplifted in spirit."

Ellen sniffed. "You? Confessing to a tardy conversion? It would be too simply dreary."

"Hell, no, nothing so primitive." Chris spread himself over a chair and inhaled deeply of the delicious smells from the kitchen. "Although God knows neither of us has much to be cheerful about, I grant you."

"That's why I was hoping to catch you alone before breakfast." Ellen's tone expressed her resentment of the radical recourse forced upon her. "You may not realize it, Chris, but you've been pretty slimy lately. Is the sisterly eye mistaken, or aren't you being awfully attentive to our little country cousin? You aren't casting her for a role in some dirty drama you're working on, are you?"

"Don't be foul," said Christopher shortly. "And Jo's no yokel. Just because she hasn't had the advantage of living in London and acquiring a vocabulary of British clichés—"

"Bless my soul and whiskers." The saccharine in Ellen's smile was chemically combined with acid. "Lord Ironpants has suddenly developed a tender spot."

"Never mind. Just what did you want to talk about?"

"Father's performance the other night. What did you think of it?"

"Top hole, pip-pip, stiff upper, and all that."

"Do you suppose he was telling the whole truth?"

"Father? Of course. You know father isn't capable of a deliberate deception."

"I wonder," said Ellen thoughtfully.

"Don't be silly. He was giving it to us straight."

"Aren't you being terribly indifferent to it all? In my opinion, it's no trifle having your inheritance reduced from millions to thousands by your father's stupidity and the venality of some crooked solicitor. There must be *something* we can do about it."

"Sure—grin and bear it. It isn't as if we'll have to go on relief, Ellen. There ought to be several hundred thou' at least to be divided between us after taxes. In the parlance of Wrightsville, that ain't hay."

"It ain't five million, either. Honestly, I'm so furious with father I could spit!"

Christopher grinned. Ellen's rage made her almost human. "Chin up, old girl," he said, not unfondly. "It's the Empiah tradition, y'know."

"Oh, go to hell! I don't know why I bother to discuss anything with you."

Jo Caswell entered the breakfast room at that moment, looking lusciously slim and young in a heather wool dress, and bringing in with her, Christopher was prepared to swear, a personal escort of sunshine. He immediately quit the natural variety for Jo's peculiar radiance; and Ellen, finding herself a crowd, withdrew disdainfully to the other end of the table.

Jo's mother, starchily aproned, appeared in the doorway from the kitchen.

"Is Godfrey down?"

"Not yet, Mum," Jo said.

"That's funny. It's a quarter past nine by the kitchen clock. He's always on time."

Ellen snapped, "Obviously, he's sometimes not."

Worry lines were showing between Mum's faded eyes. "In all the years I've been here, your father's never been late for his breakfast except when he was ill."

"Oh, for goodness' sake, Mum," said Jo, "he's probably gone out to the greenhouse and lost track of the time. It isn't as

if it were two in the afternoon."

But Mum Caswell shook her head stubbornly. "I'm going to look in his room."

"What a bloody bore." Ellen's impatience turned nasty. "What about my breakfast? Am I expected to get it myself?"

"Perish the thought!" said Christopher, anticipating Jo.

Nevertheless, Mum hurried out. Ellen brandished her empty coffee cup, ready to behead the peasant who had failed to refill it. Christopher appeased his hunger by devouring Joanne, who was trying valiantly not to let her dislike for Ellen show.

Silence poured.

Until the cry from upstairs.

It was a cry raucous with urgency and terror. And then it became a shriek, and the shriek repeated itself.

Joanne bolted for the doorway and vanished, Christopher at her heels. Ellen trailed behind, her face a curious study in dread and hope.

She came on the others midway up the staircase. Her aunt was clinging to the banister, her dumpling features the color of old dough. She managed a jerky thumb-up gesture, and Jo and Christopher sprang past her and disappeared in the upstairs hall. In a moment Jo was back alone,

running down the stairs, past her mother, past Ellen.

"I've got to phone the doctor," Jo panted. "Ellen, please take care of mother."

"But what's the matter?" demanded Ellen. "Is it father? Has something happened to him?"

"Yes . . ." Jo flew for the phone. Ellen, ascending with an arm around Margaret Caswell's waist, heard the dial clacking, and then Joanne's urgent voice: "Dr. Farnham? Jo Caswell at the Mumford place. Uncle Godfrey's had a stroke, I think. Can you come right away?"

Dr Conklin Farnham took the stairs two at a time. Mum, still dough-faced but recovered from the first shock, had insisted on returning to her brother-in-law's bedside; the doctor found her there. Christopher and Ellen, acting like trespassers, hung about in the hall outside their father's room, Joanne with them. They waited without words.

When Dr. Farnham emerged, his shoulders elevated in a chilling shrug. "He's had a stroke, all right. He's paralyzed."

"Poor Pop," said Christopher. He had not called his father that in twenty years. "What's the prognosis, Doctor?"

"It depends on a number of things, most of them unpredictable."

"Any chance of recovery from the paralysis, Dr. Farnham?" Joanne asked in a tight voice.

"The paralysis will gradually lift, but just how soon or how completely I can't say. It all depends on the extent of the damage. He ought to be in the hospital, but we're absolutely jammed just now, not a bed available, even in the wards. And I'd rather not risk the long jaunt up to Connhaven on these winter roads. So it looks like a home job, at least for now. He'll need nurses—"

"How about me?" asked Margaret Caswell, materializing in the doorway.

"Well." The doctor seemed doubtful. "I know you've done your share of patient-care, Mrs. Caswell, but in a case like this . . . Although it's true we haven't got an R.N. available right now, either . . ."

"I've taken care of Godfrey for over a quarter of a century," Mum Caswell said, with the obstinacy she showed in all matters pertaining to Godfrey Mumford. "I can take care of him now."

January 4-5 The first 48 hours after a cerebral thrombosis, Dr.

Farnham told them, were the critical ones, which was all Mum had to hear. For the next two days and nights she neither took her clothes off nor slept; nor was there anything Joanne could do or say to move her away from Godfrey Mumford's bedside, not even for ten minutes.

When the crisis was over, and the patient had survived—and was even making, according to the doctor, a sensational recovery—Jo and Ellen were finally able to pry Mum out of the sickroom and get her to lie down for a few hours. She fell asleep smiling triumphantly, as if she had scored a hand-to-hand victory over the Grim Reaper.

Wolcott Thorp, apprised by Christopher of the stroke, drove down from Connhaven on the night of the fifth, looking like a miniature Russian in his old-fashioned greatcoat and astrakhan hat.

"Godfrey's all right, isn't he? He's going to live?"

They reassured him; and he sank into a chair in the foyer, beside the little table with the silver salver on it. "All my old friends are going," he mumbled. He was so pale that Joanne got him some brandy. "And those of us who survive feel guilty and overjoyed at the same time. What swine people are . . ."

It was some time before he was able to go upstairs and look in on the patient, who was being tended again by Margaret Caswell. For ten minutes Thorp chattered to his friend with desperate animation, as Godfrey stared helplessly back at him; until, clearing his throat repeatedly as if he himself had developed a paralysis, Thorp allowed Mum to shoo him out.

"It's too much to have to watch," Thorp told Jo and the twins downstairs. "I'm too big a coward to sit there while he struggles with that paralysis. The way he tried to talk! I'm going home."

"But you can't, Uncle Wolcott," said Jo, giving him the courtesy title she had used since childhood. "It's started to snow, and the report on the radio is that it's going to be a heavy one. I'm not going to let you take that long drive back over slippery roads. The plows won't even have had time to go over them."

"But, Joanne," said the old curator weakly, "I have a huge day tomorrow at the Museum. And really, I'd rather—"

"I don't care what you'd rather. You're not leaving this house tonight, and that's that."

"Jo's right, you know," Christopher put in. "Anyway, Uncle Wolcott, you don't stand a chance. This is the new

Joanne. Look at that chin, will you?"

"You look at it," said his sister Ellen. "Oh, hell, why did I ever come home? Who's for a snack?"

January 6 The snow had fallen through half the night. From the kitchen window Christopher could look out across the white earth, an old bed with fresh sheets, past the glasshouse to the woods, where the conifers stood green among the sleeping nudes.

From behind him came a rattle of pans and the homely hiss of bacon; all around him, creeping like woodsmoke, lay warmth. Making the sounds and evoking the smells was Joanne; when her mother had turned nurse, Jo had taken over the housekeeping and cooking chores. Chris had promptly given himself the KP assignment for breakfast.

It was not a morning for fantasy; the day was too clear, the smells too real—it should have happened on a black night, with wind tearing at the house to an accompaniment of creaks. But, as Jo and Chris later agreed over clutched hands, perhaps that was what made it so creepy—the dreadful nightmare striking on a crisp morning to the smell of frying bacon.

For at the very instant that

Christopher turned away from the window with a wisecrack about to part his lips—at the very instant that he opened his mouth—he screamed. Or so it seemed. But it was a fantastic coincidence of timing. The scream was hysterically feminine and originated upstairs. It was repeated and repeated in a wild fusillade.

Jo stood fixed at the kitchen range with the long fork in her hand; then she cried, "*Mother!*" and flung the fork down and ran for the doorway as if the kitchen had burst into flames. And Chris ran after her.

In the hallway stood Wolcott Thorp, one leg raised like an elderly stork, caught in the act of putting on his galoshes in preparation for his return to Connhaven. The curator was gaping at the staircase. At the top of the flight sagged Margaret Caswell, hanging onto the banister with one hand, while her other hand clawed at her throat.

And as she saw Jo and Christopher, Mum screeched, "He's dead, he's dead," and began to topple, ever so slowly, as in a film; so that Joanne, streaking past old Thorp, was able to catch her just before she could tumble. And Christopher followed, bounding up the stairs. He collided with his sister on the landing.

"What is it?" yelled Ellen; she was in a hastily donned robe. "What in God's name has happened now?"

"It must be father." Christopher dodged around her, shouting over his shoulder, "Come on, Ellen! I may need help."

In the hall below, activated at last, Wolcott Thorp hopped for the phone, one unhooked galosh flapping. He found Dr. Farnham's number jotted on a pad for ready reference and dialed it. The doctor, located at Wrightsville General Hospital, where he was making his morning rounds, would come at once. Thorp hung up, stared for a moment at the telephone, then dialed Operator.

"Operator," he said, swallowing. "Get me the police."

Chief of Police Anselm Newby cradled the phone cautiously, as if it might respond to rougher treatment by snapping at him, like a dog. He inclined his almost delicate frame over his desk and fixed bleak eyes, of an inorganic blue, on his visitor. The visitor, relaxing on the back of his neck, had the sudden feeling that he was unwelcome, which was ridiculous.

"Ellery," said Chief Newby, "why the hell don't you stay in New York?"

Ellery slid erect, blinking. "I beg your pardon?"

"Where you belong," said the Chief in a rancorous tone. "Go home, will you?"

A manifest injustice. Home, thought Ellery, is where the heart is, and for many years he had had a special coronary weakness for Wrightsville. He had arrived in town only yesterday on one of his spur-of-the-moment visits; and, of course, the very first thing this morning he had sought out the Chief in police headquarters at the County Court House Building.

"What," Ellery inquired, "brings this on? Here we were, wallowing in remembrance of things past, warm as a pair of tea cosies. In a moment I become *persona non grata*. It's obviously the telephone call. What's happened?"

"Damn it, Ellery, every time you come to Wrightsville a major crime is committed."

Ellery sighed. It was not the first time he had been so indicted. Before Newby's tenure there had been the salty old Yankee, Chief Dakin, with his sorrowful accusations. It's a continuing curse, he thought, that's what it is.

"Who is it this time?"

"They've just found Godfrey Mumford. That was a friend of his, Wolcott Thorp, on the

phone, to notify me of topher asked darkly.
Mumford's murder."

"Old Mumford? The Chrysanthemum King?"

"That's the one. I suppose there's nothing I can do but invite you along. Are you available?"

Mr. Q, rising slowly, was available, if with reluctance. His Wrightsville triumphs invariably left an aftertaste of ashes.

"Let's go," said Wrightsville's perennial hoodoo.

Christopher, dressed for the snow, blundered on Joanne on his way to the front door. She was crouched on the second step of the staircase, hugging her knees. Jo had not cried, but her eyes were pink with pain.

"You need fresh air," prescribed Christopher. "How about it?"

"No, Chris. I don't feel like it."

"I'm just trundling around the house."

"What for?"

"Come see."

He held out his hand. After a moment she took it and pulled herself up. "I'll get my things on."

Hand in hand they trudged around the house, leaving a double perimeter of footprints in the deep snow. Eventually they came back to where they had started.

"Did you notice?" Chris-

topher asked darkly.

"Notice? What?"

"The snow."

"I could hardly not notice it," said Joanne. "I got some in the top of one of my boots."

"Tracks."

"What?"

"There aren't any."

"There are, too," said Jo. "A double set. We just made them."

"Exactly."

"Oh, stop talking like a character in a book," Jo said. "What are you driving at?"

"We left a double set of footprints," said Christopher. "Just now. But nobody else left any. Where are the tracks of the murderer?"

"Oh," said Jo; and it was a chilled, even a tremulous "Oh"—like a little icicle preparing to fall to bits.

They stood there looking at each other, Jo shivering, like a scared and forlorn child.

He opened his arms. She crept into them.

It was Ellen who answered the door. She had used the short wait to recover her poise; she had, so to speak, raised the Union Jack. Chief Anselm Newby stepped in, followed by Ellery.

"You're the Chief Constable," Ellen said. "The last time I was in Wrightsville, Dakin was Constable."

Newby received this intelligence with a displeasure that even Ellen Nash recognized. In Anse Newby's glossary, constables were exceedingly small potatoes, found in tiny, dying New England villages.

"Chief of Police," he corrected her. Professionally he used a quiet voice, with an occasional whiplash overtone. He evidently felt that this was such an occasion, for his correction flicked out at her, leaving a visible mark. "The name is Newby. This is Ellery Queen, and he's not a constable, either. Who are you?"

"Mrs. Nash—Ellen Mumford Nash, Mr. Mumford's daughter," said Ellen hastily. "I've been visiting over the holidays from England." This last she uttered in a defiant, even arrogant tone, as if invoking the never-setting sun. It made Newby examine her with his mineral eyes.

The tension Ellery detected under the woman's gloss was clearly shared by the group huddled in the entrance hall behind her. His glance sorted them out with the automatic ease of much practice. The handsome young fellow was obviously the brother of the constable-oriented Anglophile, and he was (just as obviously) feeling proprietary about the grave and lovely girl whose

elbow he gripped. Ellery became aware of a familiar pang. What quality in Wrightsville is this, he thought, that it must cast in every murder melodrama at least one ingenue with a special talent for touching the heart?

His glance passed on to the snow-haired lady, fallen in with exhaustion; and to the little elderly gentleman with the jungle eyebrows and the musty aura of old things, undoubtedly the Wolcott Thorp who had announced the finding of the body to Anse Newby over the phone. Newby, it appeared, knew Thorp; they shook hands, Thorp absently, as if his thoughts were elsewhere—upstairs, in fact, as indeed they were.

When the Chief introduced Ellery, it turned out that some of them had heard of him. He would have preferred anonymity. But this was almost always the toe he stubbed in stumbling over a skeleton in some Wrightsville closet.

"Rodge and Joan Fowler were talking about you only a few weeks ago," Joanne murmured. "To listen to them, Mr. Queen, you're a cross between a bulldog and a bloodhound when it comes to—things like this. You remember, Chris, how they raved."

"I certainly do," Christopher

said gloomily. He said nothing more, and Ellery looked at him. But all Ellery said was, "Oh, you know the Fowlers?" Then he was being introduced to Ellen.

"That Queen," said Ellen. Ellery could have sworn, from the way her nostrils flared, that he was giving off unsocial odors. And *she* said nothing more.

"Well," the Chief of Police said in a rubbing-the-hands tone of voice, "where's the body? And did anybody notify a doctor?"

"I did, just before I telephoned you," Wolcott Thorp said. "He's waiting in Godfrey's bedroom."

"Before we go up," suggested Ellery—and they all started—"would you people mind telling us how the body was found, and so on? To fill us in."

They told their stories in detail up to the point of the call to headquarters.

Newby nodded. "That's clear enough. Let's go."

So they went upstairs, Margaret Caswell leading the way, followed by Newby and Ellery, with the others straggling behind.

The old man was lying on the floor beside his bed. He lay on his back, his eyes fixed in the disconcerting stare of death.

The front of his pajama coat was clotted with the seepage from the knife wound in his chest. There had been very little bleeding. A black-handled knife trimmed in what looked like nickel protruded from the region of his heart.

"Hello, Conk," Ellery said to the doctor, but looking at the corpse.

"Ellery," Dr. Farnham exclaimed. "When did you get to town?"

"Last night. Just in time, as usual." Ellery was still looking at the dead man. "How's Molly?"

"Blooming—"

"Never mind Old Home Week," said Newby irritably. "What's your educated guess, Doctor, as to the time he got it?"

"Between four and five a.m., I'd say. A good spell after the snow stopped, if that's what you're thinking of."

"Speaking of the snow," said Ellery, looking up. "Who made that double set of tracks around the house I noticed on driving up?"

"Joanne and I," said Christopher from between his teeth.

"Oh? When did you make them, Mr. Mumford?"

"This morning."

"You and Miss Caswell walked all around the house?"

"Yes."

"Did you notice any tracks in the snow other than those you and Miss Caswell were making?" After a moment Ellery said, "Mr. Mumford?"

"No."

"Not anywhere around the house?"

"No!"

"Thank you," Ellery said. "I could remark that that's very helpful, but I can understand that you ladies and gentlemen may have a different point of view. It means no one entered or left the house after the snow stopped falling. It means the murder was committed by someone *in the house*—someone, moreover, who's still here."

"That's what it means, all right," said Chief Newby with undisguised satisfaction. He was inching carefully about the room, his bleak glance putting a touch of frost on everything.

"That was intelligent of you, Chris," Ellen Nash said viciously. "So now we're all under suspicion. What a bloody farce!"

"You've got the wrong category, I'm afraid," her brother said morosely. "As one of us, I suppose, is going to find out."

There was a dreary moment. Jo's fresh face held a look of complete incredulity, as if the full meaning of the trackless

snow had just now struck home. Ellen was staring over at her recumbent father, her expression saying that it was all his fault. Margaret Caswell leaned against the door, her lips moving without a sound. Christopher took out a pack of cigarettes, held it awkwardly for a moment, then put it back in his pocket. Wolcott Thorp mumbled something about the absolute impossibility of it all; his tone said he wished he were back in his museum among the relics of the legitimately dead.

"The knife," Ellery said. He was looking down again at Godfrey Mumford's torso. "The fact that the killer left it behind, Newby, undoubtedly means that it's useless as a clue. If it had any fingerprints on it, they probably were wiped off."

"We'll dust the room and knife for prints, anyway," said the Chief. "Don't any of you come any further than that doorway . . . Not that it's going to do us any good, as you say, Ellery. You people—I take it you've all been in this bedroom in the last day or so at one time or another?" He shrugged at their nods.

"By the way," Ellery said, "I haven't seen one of these old-fashioned jackknives in years. Does anyone recognize it? Mrs. Caswell?"

"It's Godfrey's," Mum said.

stiffly. "He kept it on the writing desk there. It was one of his prized possessions. He'd had it from boyhood."

"He never carried it around with him?"

"I've never seen it anywhere but on his desk. He was very sentimental about it... He used it as a letter opener."

"I have a boyhood artifact or two myself that I'm inclined to treasure. Did everyone know this, Mrs. Caswell?"

"Everyone in the household—" She stopped with a squeak of her breath—like, Ellery thought, a screech of brakes. But he pretended not to notice. Instead, he knelt to pick something up from the floor beside the body.

"What's that?" demanded Chief Newby.

"It's a memo pad," Dr. Farnham said unexpectedly. "It was kept on the night table at my suggestion for notations of temperature, time of medications, and so on. It apparently fell off the table when Mr. Mumford toppled from the bed; he must have jostled the table. When I got here the pad was lying on the body. I threw it aside in making my examination."

"Then it doesn't mean anything," the Chief began; but Ellery, back on his feet, staring at the top sheet of the pad,

said, "I disagree. Unless... Conk, did Mr. Mumford regain any mobility since his stroke?"

"Quite a bit," replied Dr. Farnham. "He was making a far better and faster recovery than I expected."

"Then this pad explains why he fell out of bed in the first place, Newby—why, with that knife wound, he didn't simply die where he lay after being struck."

"How do you figure that? You know how they'll thrash around sometimes when they're dying. What does the pad have to do with it?"

"The pad," said Ellery, "has this to do with it: after his murderer left him, thinking he was dead, Godfrey Mumford somehow found the strength to raise himself to a sitting position, reach over to the night table, pick up the pencil and pad—you'll find the pencil under the bed, along with the top sheet of the pad containing the medical notations, where they must have fallen when he dropped them—and block printed a message. The dying message, Newby, on this pad."

"What dying message?" Newby pounced. "Let me see that! Had he recovered enough from the paralysis, Doc, to be able to write?"

"With considerable effort, Chief, yes."

The dead man's message consisted of one word, and Newby pronounced it again, like a contestant in a spelling bee.

"MUM," he read. "Capital M, capital U, capital M—MUM."

In the silence, fantasy crept. It made no sense of the normal sort at all.

MUM.

"What on earth could Godfrey have meant?" Wolcott Thorp exclaimed. "What a queer thing to write when he was dying!"

"Queer, Mr. Thorp," Ellery said, "is the exact word."

"I don't think so," said the Chief with a grin. "It won't do, Ellery. I don't say I always believe what's in front of my nose, but if there's a simple explanation, why duck it? Everybody in town knows that Mrs. Caswell here is called Mum, and has been for over twenty-five years. If Godfrey meant to name his killer, then it's a cinch this thing on the pad refers to her. No embroidery, Ellery—it's open and shut."

"What—what *rot!*" Joanne cried, jumping to her mother's side. "Mother *loved* Uncle Godfrey. You know what you are, Chief Newby? You're a nitwit! Isn't he, Mr. Queen?"

"I would like to think about it," said Mr. Queen, staring at the pad.

January 9 It is a fact that must be recorded, at whatever peril to his reputation, that Mr. Queen had achieved in Wrightsville the status of a professional house guest. In more than two decades he had proved a miserably meager source of revenue to the Hollis Hotel. No sooner did he check in, it seemed, than he was checking out again. Let it be said in his defense that this was not the result of parsimony. It was simply because of his flair for entangling himself in Wrightsville's private lives and, as a consequence, being invited to Wrightsville's relevant private homes.

The invitation to move over to the Mumfords' was extended by an unhilarious Christopher at the iron plea of Joanne. Jo's motive was transparent enough; Ellery was not sufficiently vain to suppose it had anything to do with moonlight and roses. With Chief Newby breathing down her mother's neck, Jo had sensed an ally; she wanted Ellery not only on her side morally, but physically at hand.

Which explains why, on the morning of January ninth, Ellery settled his account at the checkout desk of the Hollis and, lugging his suitcases like ballast on either side, tacked briskly toward the northwest arc of the Square. Crossing

Upper Dade Street, he luffed past the Wrightsville National Bank, Town Hall, and the Our Boys Memorial at the entrance to Memorial Park, and finally made the side entrance of the County Court House Building. In police headquarters he paused long enough to register his change of address with Chief Newby, who received the announcement with an unenthusiastic nod.

"Any luck with the fingerprinting, by the way?" Ellery asked.

"All kinds of it. We found *everybody's* fingerprints in the bedroom. But not a one on the jackknife. Wiped clean, all right." Newby scowled. "Who'd have thought a nice little housekeeper like Mum Caswell would have the know-how to remove her prints or wear gloves?"

"If you're so certain she killed Mumford, why don't you make the pinch?"

"On what evidence? That MUM message?" The Chief threw up his hands. "Imagine the corned-beef hash a defense lawyer would make of *that* in court. Ellery, find something for me in that house, will you?"

"I'll do my best," said Ellery. "Although it may not turn out to be for you."

"What do you mean?"

"I'm concerned with the

truth, Anse. You're merely concerned with the facts," said Ellery.

And he left—before Newby could reply.

Ellery commandeered a taxicab driven, to his surprise, by someone he did not recognize, and was trundled off (after circling the Square) back up broad-bottomed State Street to the oldest part of town, where the houses were black-shuttered pre-Colonials well set back on rolling lawns in the shade of centuries-old trees. And soon he was ringing the chimes-doorbell of the Mumford mansion.

It was the day after Mumford's funeral, and the big house was still haunted. The old man's presence seemed to linger in the sight and scent of his precious chrysanthemums, which in lesser greenhouses bore their blooms from late August to December.

Joanne let him in with a glad little cry.

She established him in a tall-ceilinged bedroom upstairs with a tester bed and a beautiful Duncan Phyfe high-boy that he instantaneously coveted. But he was made melancholy by the vase of two-headed mums that Jo had set on the night table, and he soon descended in search of fleshlier company.

He found Jo, Ellen, and

Christopher in the library, and it became clear at once that the exercise of his peculiar gifts, at least as far as Ellen Nash was concerned, was her charge for his lodging.

"I'm not going to dignify for one moment the absurd conclusion that one of us murdered father," Ellen said. "He was done in by some maniac, or tramp or something—"

"The snow," her brother said damply.

"To hell with the snow! What I'm interested in is that father left a million dollars' worth of pendant in his wall safe, and I want that safe opened."

"Pendant?" said Ellery. "What pendant?"

So Christopher told him all about the New Year's Eve party, and what Godfrey Mumford had told them, and how he had exhibited the Imperial Pendant to them and then returned it to the safe.

"And he also told us," Christopher concluded, "that he was the only one who knew the safe combination. He said he was going to make a note of the combination for us. But we haven't looked for it yet."

"I have," said Ellen, "and I can't find it. So that your stay here won't be a complete waste of time, Mr. Queen, why not show us how Superman de-

fects? A little thing like finding a safe combination should barely test your reputation."

"Do we have to worry about the pendant *now*?" asked Jo.

"It shouldn't take too long, Miss Caswell," said Ellery. To himself he was saying: Maybe a million dollars' worth of jewelry has something to do with where Godfrey's boyhood knife had finally rested.

Searches were Ellery's forte, but this one defeated him. Trailed by relatives of the deceased, he squandered the rest of the morning looking in obvious places. But unlike Poe's purloined letter, the combination of the safe was nowhere to be found.

They took time out for lunch and an inventory of the unlikelier places, and the afternoon passed in exhausting this inventory. Then time out again, and over dinner a round-table discussion of other possibilities, however remote. Mr. Queen's fame as a sleuth clearly underwent reappraisal by at least one conferee present. And Mr. Queen himself grew visibly more quiet.

After dinner Ellen returned to the search of the files she had already ransacked once. Ellery, reminding himself bravely in the face of his failure that there was, after all, more than

one way to flay a kitty, took Christopher aside.

"I'm prompted," Ellery announced, "to go directly to the source of the problem—namely, to the safe itself. Can you show me where the blamed thing is?"

"What do you have in mind? Nitro?"

"Nothing so common. A bit of fiddling with the dial, a la Jimmy Valentine."

"Who's he?"

Ellery said sadly, "Never mind."

Christopher led him to the drawing room and, turning on the lights, went to the chrysanthemum painting on the wall and pushed it aside. Ellery began to flex his fingers like a violin virtuoso before a recital.

He studied the thing. The safe door was about ten inches square and in the middle was a rotating dial about six inches in diameter. Etched into the circumference of the dial were 26 evenly spaced notches numbered in sequence from 1 to 26. Around the dial Ellery saw a narrow immovable ring or collar in the top of which was set a single unnumbered notch—the notch used for aligning the numbers of the combination when opening the safe.

In the center of the dial was a bulky knob, about half the diameter of the dial itself, and on the knob was etched the

manufacturer's trademark—an outline of the god of metal-working, Vulcan; around the rim of the knob appeared the manufacturer's name and address: VULCAN SAFE & LOCK COMPANY, INC., NEW HAVEN, CONN.

The safe door was locked. Ellery duly fiddled with the dial, ear cocked a la Jimmy Valentine. Nothing happened—at least, to the safe door. What did happen was the entrance into the drawing room of Ellen, in a sort of half excitement, trailed by a disdainful Joanne.

"Ah, the ladies," said Ellery, trying to cover up his chagrin. "And have you found the combination to this stubborn little brute?"

"No," Ellen said, "but we've found this. Maybe it'll tell you something."

Ellery took the sheet of paper. It was a bill of sale for the wall safe.

"Dated nine years ago." He pinched his nose, which was itching. "Must have been ordered just after he got back from that trip to the Orient you told me about, when he acquired the Imperial Pendant. Especially ordered, then, to be the repository of the pendant. Invoice tallies—same name and address of manufacturer; terse description, 'Wall safe per order.'"

"That's it," said Christopher. "No doubt about it."

"Is it important, Mr. Queen?" asked Jo, in spite of herself.

"It could be mighty important, Miss Caswell. While I have fiddled and burned, you may have discovered a treasure."

"Then you have better eyes than I," said Ellen. "Anyway, where do we go from here?"

"Patience, Mrs. Nash. Chris, I want you to take a trip to New Haven. Check out the safe company and learn everything you can about this particular model—details of the original order, any special instructions accompanying the order—and, yes, check the price, which seems very high to me. Also, the Vulcan Company may have the combination on file, which would simplify matters. If they don't, hire one of their experts to come back with you, in case we have to force the safe."

"Meanwhile, you girls keep searching for a record of the combination. Cover every room in the house. Not excluding the greenhouse."

January 11 Christopher's return taxi from the Wrightsville airport produced a clamor. Jo flew into the foyer from the direction of the kitchen, followed by Mum; Ellen descended from upstairs in jumps.

Ellery, a lonely stag, was meandering among the red spruce and birch outside; and Joanne, booted and mackinawed, was dispatched to fetch him.

Assembled in the drawing room, they saw from Christopher's expression that he was no courier of good news.

"Briefly," Christopher told them, "the Vulcan Safe and Lock Company, Inc., no longer exists. The plant and all its files were destroyed by a fire in 1958. The firm never went back into business. Fellow sufferers, I return to your bosoms with nothing—not a clue, not a record of anything connected with the purchase of the safe."

"The high price," Ellery asked, frowning. "Did you remember to check the price?"

"Right. I did. And you were Right, I mean. The price father paid was just about twice what safes of similar size and type were bringing the year he ordered it. It's funny that father would let himself be skinned that way. He may have been careless about his lawyer, but he was a good enough businessman, after all, to have made millions in packaged seeds before he went chrysanthemum-happy."

"There was nothing wrong with your father's business sense, Chris," said Ellery

"Nothing at all." And his eyes promptly went into hiding.

Ellen, who held a more cynical view of her late sire, was clearly of the opinion that the father's simplicity had been passed on to his son. "Didn't you at least bring back a safe expert to open the bloody thing?"

"No, but I got in touch with another New Haven safe outfit, and they'll send a man up as soon as I phone them."

"Then do it. Put through a trunk call right now. What kind of fool are you?"

Christopher's ears had turned a lovely magenta. "And you, sister mine, you're a greedy little devil. You're so hot to lay your hands on that pendant that you've lost the few decent instincts you used to have. You've waited this long, can't you wait another couple of days? Father's hardly settled in his grave."

"Please," murmured Mum.

"Please!" cried Jo.

His reflections disturbed by the sibling colloquy, Ellery roused himself. "It may not be necessary to call in anybody. Your father left a dying message—MUM. Chief Newby was positive that Godfrey was leaving a clue to his killer's identity—Mum Caswell here. But if Godfrey meant to identify his murderer, why did

he choose to write MUM? MUM can mean a great many different things, which I shan't go into now; but, as an identification, it's an ambiguity. Had he wanted to accuse Mrs. Caswell, he could simply have written down her initials, MC. If he'd meant to accuse Joanne or Mr. Thorp—JC or WT. One of his children? 'Son' or 'daughter'—or *their* initials. Any one of which would have been specific and unmistakable.

"I choose to proceed, then," Ellery went on, "on the assumption that Godfrey, in writing MUM, did not mean his killer.

"Now. What had he promised to leave for you? The combination of the safe containing the only considerable asset in his estate. So his dying message may have been meant to be the safe combination. If so, the theory can be tested."

Going to the painting, he pushed it aside. Entranced, they trooped after him.

"Study this dial for a moment," Ellery said. "What do you see? Twenty-six numbered notches. And what does twenty-six suggest? *The number of letters in the alphabet!*

"So let's translate M-U-M into numbers. M is the thirteenth letter of the alphabet, U the twenty-first. Safe combination: 13-21-13. Now

first we twirl the dial a few revolutions—to clear the action, so to speak. Then we turn to 13 and set it directly under the alignment notch—there. Next we turn the dial to the right—we'll try that direction first—and align the 21. And now to the left—usually the directions alternate—back to 13.”

Ellery paused. The crucial instant was at hand. There was no movement behind him, not even a breath.

He took hold of the knob and pulled, gently.

The thick, heavy door of the safe swung open.

A shout of triumph went up—and died as if guillotined.

The safe was empty. Utterly. No pendant, no jewel box, not even a scrap of paper.

Later that day, true to his commitment, Ellery visited Anse Newby at police headquarters and reported the opening of the safe, including its emptiness.

“So what have you accomplished?” the Chief growled. “Somebody killed the old man, opened the safe, swiped the pendant. That doesn’t knock my theory over. It just gives us the motive.”

“You think so?” Ellery squeezed his lower lip. “I don’t. According to everyone’s testi-

mony, Godfrey told them he was the only one who knew the combination. Did one of them figure out the M-U-M combination before I did and beat me to the safe? Possible, but I consider it unlikely, if you’ll pardon the self-puff. It takes experienced follow-through thinking to make the jump from M-U-M to 13-21-13.”

“All right, try this,” argued Newby. “Somebody sneaked downstairs in the middle of that night and got lucky.”

“I don’t believe in that sort of luck. Anyway, it would call on one of them to be a mighty good actor.”

“One of them is an actor.”

“But, I gather, not a good one.”

“Or maybe she—”

“Let’s keep it a neutral ‘he’.”

“—maybe he forced old Godfrey to tell him the combination before sinking the knife into him.”

“Even less likely. Everyone knew that Godfrey’s paralysis included his speaking apparatus, which even in a good recovery is usually the last to come back, if it comes back at all. Certainly no one could bank on the old man’s being able to talk suddenly. Did the killer order Godfrey to write the combination down, under threat of the knife? Even so, Godfrey would

have been a fool to do it; his daughter notwithstanding, he seems to have been very far from a fool. He'd have known he was a goner the moment he wrote it.

"I'll admit," scowled Ellery, "that all these unlikelihoods don't make for exclusive conclusions. But they do accumulate a certain mass, and the weight of them convinces me that the killer put Mumford out of his misery simply to hurry up the inheritance of the pendant, not to steal it; that the killer then left, and Mumford wrote M-U-M on his own."

"You talk all-fired pretty," said Chief Newby with a grin. "There's only one thing."

"And that is?"

"If the killer didn't swipe the pendant, where is it?"

"That," Ellery nodded morosely, "is Bingo."

"I don't mean to high-hat my betters," twanged Newby, "but you have to admit you've got a tendency to bypass the obvious. All right, you hit on M-U-M as Godfrey's 13-21-13 safe combination. But why does that have to have anything to do with his reason for writing MUM on the pad? He was a bug on mums, so it was natural for him to use M-U-M as the combination. But he could have meant something entirely different when he wrote M-U-M on

the pad. I still say he was fingering his murderer. And when you have a suspect around who's actually known as M-U-M, and called Mum, what more do you want?"

"Mum Caswell isn't the only possible suspect."

"Come again?"

Ellery's reasoning organ, needled by a phrase Newby had used, was busy with its embroidery.

"A bug on mums, you say. My point is, it's absolutely bizarre and incredible that MUM should have been his dying message. MUM is the symbol of the man who wrote it. He was a famous horticulturist specializing in mums. Everything about the man said MUM, from the flowers in his greenhouse to the oil paintings and prints and sculptures and intaglios and jewelry and Lord knows what else of them throughout the place. MUM was Mumford's trademark: a mum on his stationery, as I've taken the trouble to check; also on his wallet, and on his car, and in wrought iron over the front entrance. The moldings and doorknobs are all decorated with carved mums. And did you notice that his shirts sport an embroidered mum instead of his monogram? Also, if you'll pardon me, there's the irony of the knife that took his life,

Godfrey's boyhood knife. How many times, allow me to wonder, did little Goddie Mumford play *mumblety-peg* with it?"

At this terminal extravagance—this spacecraft leap into whimsy—the Chief could not avoid a groan. Ellery rose, undismayed.

"It's that kind of case, Newby. And by the way, there's one line of investigation I haven't followed through yet. The search for that safe combination sidetracked me. I'll look into it tomorrow morning."

January 12 Having strained his prerogatives as a houseguest by arranging to borrow one of the Mumford cars, Ellery came downstairs the next morning before anyone else was up; and as he was passing the table in the foyer something caught his eye. There was a letter on the silver salver.

Being the world's nosiest noonan, Mr. Q paused to look it over. The dime-store envelope was unstamped, unpostmarked, and addressed in a childishly disguised scrawl.

The envelope read: *To Ellery.*

He was surprised and delighted—surprised because the letter was so totally unexpected, delighted because he was in

great need of a new point of inquiry. He tore open the envelope and removed from it a sheet of cheap notepaper.

The handwriting of the message was similarly disguised:

12/1/65

Mum's the word. If you tell what you know I'll kill you, too.

There was no signature.

Was this a new development? Hardly. All it did was obfuscate the mystification. The letter was from a not too uncommon type—the garrulous murderer; but what was he, Ellery, supposed to "know"? Whatever it was, he ardently wished he knew it.

He began to chew on the problem. After a while he began to look more cheerful. Obviously, his supposed knowledge was dangerous to the murderer. A yeast was therefore at work in the brew. Fear—the killer's fear—might produce a heady potion on which the killer would choke.

Ellery slipped the letter into his pocket and left the house.

He drove the station wagon to Connhaven, where he made for the Merrimac campus. Here he sought out the university museum. In the main office of the tomblike building he found waiting for him—he had tele-

phoned ahead for the appointment—Wolcott Thorp.

"You have me all atwitter, Mr. Queen." The curator touched Ellery's hand with his papery paw. "And not entirely at ease. I assume you're working on poor Godfrey's murder. Why me?"

"You're a suspect," Ellery pointed out.

"Of course!" And Thorp hastened to add, "Aren't we all? If I'm acting guilty, it's human nature."

"That's the trouble, or one of them." Ellery smiled. "I'm familiar with the psychology of guilt by confrontation, even of the innocent. But that's not what I'm here for, so stop worrying. A museum to me is what the circus is to small boys. Do you have time to show me around yours?"

"Oh, yes!" Thorp began to beam.

"I'm curious about your particular field. It's West Africa, isn't it?"

The beam became sheer sunshine. "My friend," said Wolcott Thorp, "come with me! No, this way..."

For the next hour Ellery was the beneficiary of the man's genuine erudition. Ellery's interest was by no means simulated. He had a deep-rooted feeling for antiquity and anthropology (what was it but

detection of a different kind?), and he was fascinated by the artifacts Thorp showed him from what had been western Sudan and the district of Kayes on the Senegal—idols and tutelary gods, fetishes, masks, charms, headdresses of pompons used by the Mandingos to ward off the powers of evil.

Happily inundated with information, Ellery finally interrupted the curator's flow long enough to ask for a sheet of paper on which to make notes. The curator obliged with a piece of museum stationery; and Ellery, preparing to notate, forced himself back from the dark tribalisms of Africa.

The inscription on the museum letterhead was arranged in two lines. The top line was simply the initials of the museum; the line below spelled out the full name: Merrimac University Museum.

The top line . . . MUM.

Thorp had excused himself for a moment; and folding the paper, clean of unnoted notes, Ellery took from his pocket the anonymous letter he had picked up from the salver that morning. He was about to insert the museum letterhead into the envelope when his attention was caught by the envelope's scrawled salutation.

To Ellery.

No, that was wrong!

To was correct enough, as he had read it, but not Ellery. The final letter had a long tail on it; this tail had been the cause of his mistaken reading. On re-examination the ry was not an ry at all; it was a straggle-tailed n.

To Ellen.

It was Ellen who knew something dangerous to the killer.

It was Ellen who was being threatened.

Wolcott Thorp, returning, was astounded to see his visitor clap a hand to his head, jam a letter into his pocket, and dart out without so much as a fare-thee-well.

Crouched over the wheel of the station wagon, Ellery roared back to Wrightsville and the Mumford house, cursing every impediment that forced him to slacken speed. He left the car in the driveway and clattered past an alarmed Margaret Caswell and up the stairs in the longest leaps his long legs could manage.

He burst into Ellen's room.

Ellen, propped up on a chaise longue by a picture window in some flowing garment that might have been designed for a painting by Gainsborough, was sipping hot chocolate from what could only have been—even in his agitation

Ellery noticed it—a bone-china mustache cup.

"Am I supposed to be flattered, Mr. Queen," asked Ellen in a her-Ladyship-is-not-amused sort of voice, "by your boorish intrusion?"

"Beg pardon," panted Ellery. "I thought you might be dead."

Her Wedgwood eyes blued further. She set the antique cup down on an end table. "Did you say *dead*?"

He extended the anonymous letter. "Read this."

"What is it?"

"It's for you. I found it on the salver this morning and opened it by mistake, thinking it was addressed to me. I'm thankful I did. And you may be, too, before we're finished."

She took the letter and read it swiftly. The paper slipped from her hand, struck the edge of the chaise, and fluttered to the floor.

"What does it mean?" she whispered. "I don't understand."

"I think you do." Ellery stooped over her. "You know something dangerous to your father's murderer, and your father's murderer knows you know it. Ellen, tell me what it is, for the sake of your own safety. Think! What do you know that would explain a threat like this?"

He read in her eyes the immediate qualification of her terror. A slyness crept into them, and the lids slid halfway down.

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"It's foolhardy of you to hold it back. We have a murderer on our hands, and he's getting edgy. Tell me, Ellen."

"There's nothing to tell. I know nothing." She turned away. "Now will you please leave? I'm not exactly dressed for entertaining."

Ellery retrieved the note and left, damning all idiots. In addition to his other commitments he would now have to undertake the thankless task of acting as the woman's watchdog.

What was Ellen concealing?

Christopher, sighting the pale sun over the top of a pine, recited the opening lines of *Snowbound*.

"Whittier," he explained. "I still have a childish fondness for the old boy."

Joanne laughed, a sound of sleigh bells. "Delivered like a pro. Bravo."

"Not really. A pro gets fairly steady employment."

"You could, too, if you tried. Really tried."

"You think so?"

"I know so."

"You know something? So do I. But only when I'm with you."

"I'm glad."

"Enough to cleave to my bosom?"

"I don't quite know," said Joanne cautiously, "how to take that, Chris."

"Take it as an interim proposal. I don't want to tie you up in knots until I've made it all the way. You make me feel life-size, Jo. I suppose I'm trying to say that I need you."

Jo smiled, but inside. She slipped a little mittened hand into his glove, and they strolled toward the pines and the pale sun.

Wolcott Thorp came down from the university and Chief Newby drove over from headquarters after dinner, both at Ellery's invitation.

"What's up?" Newby asked Ellery, aside. "Have you come up with something?"

"Have you?" asked Ellery.

"Not a damn thing. I'm not the Wizard of Oz, the way you're supposed to be. No miracles yet?"

"No miracles, I'm afraid."

"Then what's cooking to-night?"

"A mess. I'm going to fling it at them, and see who runs for the mop—if any."

They joined the others in the drawing room.

"I've taken the liberty of asking Chief Newby to drop by," Ellery began, "because we need, I think, to redefine our position. Especially in reference to the dying message.

"When Chief Newby and I first found M-U-M on the scene, we made the natural assumption that Godfrey Mumford had left it as a clue to his killer's identity. Further thought compromised this theory, at least as far as I was concerned. The clue had so many possible interpretations that I shifted to the theory that it meant the safe combination. That worked out fine but accomplished nothing. I opened the safe, and the safe proved to be empty."

Ellery paused, seeming to wing far off. But his vision was in focus, and he could see nothing in their faces but attentiveness and bafflement.

"Now, after thinking it over again, I've changed my mind again," he went on. "If Godfrey had wanted to leave the combination, all he had to write down was 13-21-13. It would have been almost as easy to write as M-U-M, and there would have been no chance of its being misunderstood. So now I've gone back to the original theory, which Newby has never abandoned—namely,

that the message points to the murderer's identity. If so, to whom?"

He paused again; and most of his captive audience waited in varying stages of nervousness for revelation.

"The Chief," said Ellery, with a side-glance at Mrs. Caswell, who alone seemed unmoved, "is convinced of that identity. And, of course, from a strictly logical point of view, it is certainly possible."

"It is certainly *stuff*," said Mum; then pulled her head back in like a turtle.

"If it's stuff, Mrs. Caswell," smiled Ellery, "what's coming is pure moonshine. Yet—who knows? I'm not going to turn my back on a theory simply because it sounds like something out of Lewis Carroll. Bear with me.

"From the beginning this case has exhibited a remarkable series of what I have to call, for want of a more elegant term, 'doubles.'

"For example, there have been at least four 'doubles' connected with the murdered man: Godfrey had developed a famous chrysanthemum with a *double* blossom on one stem; the party he gave was to celebrate a *double* event, New Year's Eve and his seventieth birthday; his wall safe cost about *double* what it should

have cost; and his children, Ellen and Christopher, are twins—another *double*.

“Further, let’s not overlook the most significant *double* in the case: the double mystery of who killed Godfrey and what happened to the Imperial Pendant.

“What’s more, we can go on through a great many more *doubles*. Because, if you interpret the dying message as a clue to the killer, each of you has at least two connections with MUM.

“For instance, Ellen.” Ellen gave a visible start. “One, her maiden name was Mumford—first syllable, *Mum*. Second, she’s married to an Egyptologist. Egyptology connotes pyramids, the Sphinx—and *mummies*.”

Ellen reacted with a double sort of sound, like a jeer crossed with a neigh. “Rubbish! Nonsense!”

“It is, isn’t it? Yet this thing gets curiousest and curiousest. Take Christopher. Again, the first syllable of *Mumford*. And second, Chris, your profession.”

“My profession?” asked Christopher, puzzled. “I’m an actor.”

“And what are other words for actor? Player, performer, thespian, trouper . . . *mummer*.”

Christopher’s handsome face

reddened; he seemed torn between the impulse to laugh and the need to fume. As a compromise he simply threw up his hands.

Chief Newby was looking embarrassed. “Are you serious, Ellery?”

“Why, I don’t know whether I am or not,” said Ellery gravely. “I’m just trying it on for size. You’re next, Mr. Thorp.”

The elderly curator immediately looked frightened. “I? How do I fit in?”

“First, the initials of the museum as they appear on your stationery: Merrimac University Museum—M-U-M. Second, your special interest in the culture of West Africa and its artifacts: fetishes, masks, charms, talismans—oh, and pompons.”

“I fail,” said Thorp coldly, “to see the connection.”

“The pompon is a variety of *chrysanthemum*. And if you want still another cross-reference; Mr. Thorp, there’s a phrase to describe your special field. Surely you know it?”

Here Thorp’s erudition was apparently wanting. He shook his head.

“*Mumbo jumbo*,” Ellery solemnly told him.

Thorp looked astonished. Then he chuckled. “How true. In fact, the very words come from the language of the

Klassönke, a Mandingo tribe. What a quaint coincidence!"

"Yes," said Ellery; and the way he said it re-established the mood the museum man's laughter was shattering. "And Mrs. Caswell, I remind you again that Chief Newby has all along thought the dying message points to you. *Mum Caswell.*"

Margaret Caswell's features took on the slightest pallor. "I hardly think this is the time to be playing games, Mr. Queen. But—all right, I'll play, too. You said that each of us has at least two connections with Godfrey's word on that pad. What's the other one of mine?"

Ellery's tone was positively apologetic. "I've noticed that you're fond of beer, Mrs. Caswell, particularly German beer. One of the best-known of the German beers is called *mum.*"

And this at last brought Joanne to her feet, her little hands clenched. Her anger gave her a charming dimension.

"At first this was plain ridiculous," stormed Jo. "Now it's—it's criminally asinine! Are you purposely making fun of us? And if I may ask a silly question—and no doubt I'll get a pair of silly answers—what are my two connections with MUM?"

"There," mourned Ellery,

"you have me, Jo. I haven't been able to spot one connection, let alone two."

"Quite amusing, I'm sure," Ellen said. "Meanwhile, we're neglecting the important thing. What happened to the pendant?"

All Christopher's dissatisfaction with the Queen performance burst out at finding a target he felt free to attack. "Important thing," he cried. "I can't make head or tail of what's going on here, but don't you consider it important to find out who killed father, Ellen? Aren't you concerned with anything but that damned pendant? You make me feel like a ghoul!"

"Don't flatter yourself," Ellen said to her twin. "You're nothing so impressive as a ghoul, Chris. What you are is a bloody ass."

He turned his back on his sister; and regal as a Borgia, she stalked from the room. From the stairway her complaint came to them distinctly: "You'd think father would have installed a lift instead of making us climb these antediluvian stairs."

"Yes, your Majesty!" yelled Christopher.

While Mr. Q murmured to Chief Newby, "Ellery in Blunderland. Through the Magnifying Glass . . ."

"What are you," snarled the Chief of Police, grabbing his coat and hat, "a nut or something?"

January 13 The one morning of the week when Ellen could be relied on to come down for breakfast was Sunday. Invariably she descended to a kipper and a slice of dry toast (except on communion days), after which, trailing High Church clouds of glory, she strode off to join her Anglican co-worshippers.

It was therefore a matter of remark that on this particular Sunday morning she failed to appear.

It was especially remarkable to Ellery, who had been barred by the proprieties from passing the night guarding her bedside. Enlisting Margaret Caswell's chaperonage, he rushed upstairs, kicked open the unlocked door, and dashed in.

Ellen was still in bed. He listened frantically to her breathing; he took her pulse; he shook her, shouting in her ear. Then he damned her perversity and the unlocked door, which was an example of it.

"Phone Conk Farnham!" he bellowed at Mrs. Caswell.

There followed a scene of chaos, not without its absurdity, like an old Mack Sennett

comedy. Its climax came when, for the umpteenth time in ten days, Dr. Farnham arrived on the run with his little black bag. It was surely Conk's opinion, thought Ellery, that he was hopelessly trapped in the antics of a houseful of lunatics.

"Sleeping pills," the doctor said. "Slight overdose. No need for treatment; she didn't take enough. She'll come out of it by herself soon—in fact, she's coming out of it now."

"This must be it on the night table," Ellery mumbled.

"What?"

"The medium of the pills."

A cup of scummy cold chocolate sat there, almost full.

"That's it, all right," said Dr. Farnham, after tasting it. "It's loaded. If she'd swallowed the whole cupful, Ellery, she'd have been done for."

"When will she be able to talk?"

"As soon as she's all the way out."

Ellery snapped his fingers. "Excuse me, Conk!" he said, and dashed past Mrs. Caswell and tore down the stairs. In the breakfast room, silent and glum, sat Jo and Chris and Wolcott Thorp.

"How's Ellen?" Chris asked, half rising.

"Sit down. She's all right. This time. Now we can start worrying about next time."

"Next time?"

"Somebody slipped a lethal overdose of sleeping pills in her hot chocolate before she went to bed last night—unless you're prepared to argue that Ellen is the type who would attempt suicide, which in my book she definitely is not. Anyway, she took only a few sips, thereby surviving. But whoever tried to kill her may try another time, and my guess is the time will be sooner than later. So let's not dawdle. Who knows who prepared the hot chocolate last night?"

"I do," said Joanne. "She prepared it herself. I was in the kitchen with her."

"All the time she was fixing it?"

"No, I left before she did."

"Anyone else in the kitchen at the time, or near it?"

"Not I," said Christopher promptly, wiping his brow, which for some reason was damp. "If I ever give way to one of my homicidal impulses toward Ellen, I'll use something sure, like cyanide."

But no one smiled.

"You, Mr. Thorp?" asked Ellery, fixing the curator with a glittering eye.

"Not I," said the little man, stuttering.

"Had anyone gone up to bed?"

"I don't think so," said Jo,

her eyes worried. "No, I'm sure no one had. It was just after we finished that crazy farce of yours in the drawing room—when Ellen pranced out, I mean. A few minutes later she came downstairs again to prepare her chocolate. All the rest of us were still here. Don't you remember?"

"No, because I was seeing Chief Newby out, and we talked outside for a few minutes before he drove off. Unfortunately I share the general weakness of being unable to be in two places at the same time. Did Ellen go directly upstairs with her chocolate?"

"I can answer that," said Christopher. "I'd gone to the library to lick my wounds, and Ellen came in for a book to read in bed, she said. She wasn't there more than two or three minutes. She took one of yours, if I'm not mistaken."

"Maybe that's why she fell asleep so soon," said Jo with a little snap-crackle-pop in her voice.

"Even that," said Ellery with a bow, "is not impossible. In any event, she must have left her cup standing in the kitchen for those two or three minutes."

"I guess so," said Christopher. "It would also seem that we were all milling around,

with opportunity to dodge into the kitchen and tamper with it, allowing for a healthy lie or two. Take your pick, Mr. Queen. In my own defense I can only say I didn't do it."

"Nor," stuttered little Wolcott Thorp, "did I."

"It looks," said Jo, "as if you'll have to make the most of what you have."

"Which," snapped Ellery, "is precious little."

And he left them to go back upstairs, where he found Dr. Farnham preparing to depart. Ellen was awake, propped up against the headboard, looking not hung over at all. What she did look like was hostile and furtive.

Ellery went to work.

But his most tried techniques, running from the sympathetic plea to the horrendous warning, failed to budge her. Her brush with death seemed to have left her only the more doggedly crouched over whatever secret she was concealing.

The most Ellery could pry out of her was the admission that she had bought sleeping pills herself from a local "chemist," on the prescription of another doctor in town whom she did not name. Finally, slipping down in the bed, she turned her face to the wall and refused to answer any more of his questions.

Checkmated, Ellery withdrew, leaving Mrs. Caswell on guard.

Someone else, he thought, was at the moment sharing his frustration. The agent of the sleeping pills.

The dinner conversation had gaps. Ellery pushed the food around on his plate. Ellen attempted a show of Empire fortitude, but the attempt was sorry, and he suspected that she had come down to the dinner table only because of the creepy isolation of her bedroom.

Margaret Caswell sat in a tense posture that suggested listening, as for the baying of bloodhounds. Christopher and Joanne sought reassurance in eloquent eye examination of each other. Wolcott Thorp tried to stimulate a discussion of some recent Fulah acquisitions by the museum, but no one listened even politely, and he too fell under the spell of the pervasive gloom.

They were about to leave the dinner table when the doorbell rang with an angry chime. Ellery leaped to life.

"Chief Newby," he said. "I'll let him in, if no one minds. Please go to the drawing room—all of you. We're going to get on with this lethal nonsense and make something

of it if it takes all night."

He hurried to the front door. Newby hurled his hat and overcoat on a tapestried chair but pointedly failed to remove his overshoes, as if announcing that at the first sound of jabberwocky he intended to exit.

They joined the others in the drawing room, and Newby said, "All right, Ellery, get on with it."

"Let's begin," Ellery said, "with a fact. The fact that you, Ellen, are in imminent danger. What we don't know, and must know, is why. It's something only you can tell us, and I suggest you do so before it's too late. I remind you that the murderer of your father is here in this room, listening and watching."

Four pairs of eyes shifted from Ellen immediately, but they came right back again.

Ellen's lips remained drawn down at the corners, like a scar. "I told you—I don't know what you're talking about."

"You're afraid, of course. But do you think you're going to buy immunity with silence? A murderer needs to sleep at night, too, and his best assurance of peace of mind is your permanent removal. So talk while you still can."

"It's my job to warn you, Mrs. Nash," Chief Newby put in

sourly, "that if you're holding back evidence, you're committing a crime. How much trouble do you want to be in?"

But Ellen fixed her eyes on the fists in her lap.

"All right," said Ellery, and his tone was so odd that even Ellen stirred. "If you won't talk, I will."

"Let's start all over again. What did Godfrey mean by writing M-U-M? Ignore what I've said before about it. I've now come to a final conclusion."

"A man clear-headed enough to leave a dying message is clear-headed enough to avoid ambiguity. Since MUM involved most of you—and in more ways than one, far-fetched as most of them are—then I have to conclude that Godfrey did *not* intend MUM to indicate the identity of his murderer."

"Consequently, once more I have to go back to what Godfrey did promise to leave you—the combination of his safe."

"But you went through all that," exploded Newby. "And it washed out—the safe was empty."

"Not a complete washout, Newby. I translated MUM into numbers because of the twenty-six numbers on the dial, and that proved correct as far as it went. But what if it didn't go far enough? Remember the

doubles? One was that the safe cost Godfrey about double what it should have. *What if there was a good, solid, practical reason for that double cost?* Suppose there's more to that safe than meets the eye—*some feature that cost the extra money. Double cost... how about double safe?*"

That brought their mouths open, and he continued swiftly. "If it was a double safe, there would be *two* combinations. One would work by the numbers 13-21-13, as it does, and would open the orthodox safe. The other combination would open another safe!—which obviously must be contained *within* the safe, making an inner, smaller safe. And suppose—since that's the word Godfrey wrote down just before he died—suppose that not only is MUM the combination for the outer safe, but MUM is also the combination for the inner safe. One MUM translating into numbers, the second remaining exactly what it is—a *word of three letters*."

"But there aren't any letters on the dial," protested Newby.

"Right. But remember what's etched on the rim of the knob? The name and address of the manufacturer: VULCAN SAFE & LOCK COMPANY, INC., NEW HAVEN, CONN. And you'll note that, contained

in those words, are an M and a U!

"Shall we try it?"

Ellery went over to the oil painting and slid it to one side. He revolved the dial a few times, then turned it until the M of COMPANY lay directly under the alignment notch; then he turned right to the U of VULCAN, aligning that, then left, back to the M of COMPANY.

He pulled on the knob.

The safe door did not swing open. Instead, the knob came out in his hand! And behind the knob, within the thickness of the safe door, where the tumblers and mechanism lay, appeared a small compartment—a safe within a safe. And in the compartment, flashing like a minor sun surrounded by sixteen glowing planets, was the Imperial Pendant.

"Alagazam," Ellery said softly, holding it aloft so that the light from the old-fashioned crystal chandelier blazed from the pendant in a thousand coruscations. "When Mr. Mumford put the necklace away, his back must have been to you, and it was a broad back. It was into the knob-safe that he put this, not into the regular one. That's why he probably never bothered to put the pendant in a bank vault, Christopher. Even if someone tried to burgle this

safe, could he dream that the real safe was behind the knob? It was, if you'll excuse the pun, very safe indeed. Here, Newby, I imagine you'd better take charge of this until the will is probated and certain other matters are cleared up."

And Ellery tossed the pendant to Newby, while the others' heads moved in unison, like the heads of spectators at a tennis match.

"Q.E.D.," said Ellery. "One half of our mystery is solved. It remains only to solve the other half."

"Who killed Godfrey Mumford?"

He faced them with such fierceness that they all shrank back.

"I've known since yesterday morning who the murderer is," Ellery said. "There wasn't a chance, by the way, that he'd take off—not so long as the pendant was missing. It was the finding of the pendant that was holding me up, too."

"I want you all to look at this letter from the murderer to Ellen. Examine it carefully."

He took it from his pocket and handed it to Chief Newby, who looked it over, scowled, and passed it on.

12/1/65

Mum's the word. If you tell

what you know I'll kill you, too.

When it came back to him from Thorp, the last to read it, Ellery could detect nothing but blankness on any face.

"You don't see it?"

"Come on, Ellery," Newby rasped. "So I'm as blind as the rest and you've got the eyes of a chicken hawk. What's the point?"

"The point is the date."

"The date?"

"The date at the top. 12/1/65."

"Why, that's wrong," said Jo suddenly. "It's January now, not December."

"Correct. The letter was left on the salver the morning of January 12th—1/12/65. The writer reversed the numerals for the month and day. Why? In the United States we write the month numeral first, always, *then* the day numeral. *It's in England that they do it the opposite way.*

"Who in this household has been living in England for years? Who uses the Anglicism 'trunk call' for 'long distance'? Who says 'lift' for 'elevator,' 'Chief Constable' for 'Chief of Police,' 'chemist' instead of 'druggist' or 'pharmacist'?"

"Ellen, of course. Ellen, who wrote this 'threatening' letter to herself."

Ellen was glaring at Ellery as if he had turned into a monster from outer space. "No! I didn't!"

But Ellery ignored her. "And why should Ellen have written a threatening letter to herself? Well, what was the effect the letter produced? It made her look as though she were next in line to be murdered—by implication, therefore, innocent of the killing of Godfrey.

"This was doubly indicated by the clumsy poisoning attempt on herself—an evident phony. She never meant to drink more than a few sips. The whole hot chocolate episode was designed to make that 'threat' look good."

Now his eyes found Ellen's and locked.

"Why should you want to make yourself look innocent, Ellen? The innocent don't have to *make* themselves look innocent. Only the guilty—"

"Are you accusing *me*?" Ellen shrieked. "Of stabbing my own father to death?" She looked about wildly. "Chris, Jo—you can't believe—*Mum!*"

But Ellery drove ahead without mercy. "The clue points directly to you, Ellen, and only to you. Of course, if you've anything to say that puts a different complexion on all this, I advise you to say it now."

Ellery kept her gaze pinned down like a butterfly specimen. She began to tremble. And as she did so, he suddenly said in the kindest of voices, "Don't be afraid any more, Ellen. You see, *I know what you know*. All I want you to do is to speak out, to tell us what you know."

And she did, her story rushing out. "I was up the night father was murdered—couldn't sleep for some reason. It was long past midnight. While I was in the upstairs hall, on my way down to the kitchen for a snack... I happened to see somebody sneak out of father's room. I was sure he saw me. I was afraid to tell..."

"And who was it you saw, Ellen?"

"It was... it was..." And her arm shot out—"... it was Wolcott Thorp!"

Ellery went early to his room, packed his suitcases, and slipped like the Arab silently away, leaving behind a bread-and-butter note. He did not check back in to the Hollis, the savor having gone out of Wrightsville; but he had a couple of hours to kill before plane time, and he killed them, appropriately, at police headquarters.

"Ellery!" Chief Newby greeted him, rising and seizing his hand. "I was hoping you'd

drop in. I never did get to thank you properly. That was a slick scene you put on last night. You told a real whopper."

"I may have told," said Ellery soberly, "several."

"You said you knew what Ellen knew."

"Oh, that. Yes, of course. But I had to get her to talk; I was reasonably certain that was what she was holding back. And that letter business—"

"Did you really think she wrote that letter?"

"Not for a moment. Except for psychos, murderers don't admit their killings—even in disguised handwritings—at a time when they're not even suspected. And Ellen's Britishness was so blatant that anyone could have used the British dating system to frame her. So although I knew she hadn't written that threatening letter to herself, I accused her of it last night to frighten her into putting the finger on Thorp."

"Thorp, of course, was the one who wrote the letter. He counted on my spotting the Anglicism and pinning it on Ellen for the reason I gave—that double whammy about if-she-wants-us-to-think-she's-innocent-she-must-be-guilty. And if I hadn't spotted it, he could always have called it to my attention."

"It may even be that Thorp

originally designed the frame-up letter to be used by him in the event Ellen did talk and accused him of what she'd seen. The trouble was, even when Ellen kept her mouth shut, Thorp had second thoughts. That poisoned chocolate business wasn't an attempt on Ellen's part to make herself look innocent, as I mendaciously suggested last night in putting the pressure on her; it was a genuine attempt by Thorp to shut her mouth before she could open it. He expected us—if it had succeeded—to accept it as a suicide-confession."

"Incidentally," said the Chief, "you said you knew it was Thorp—"

"A slight exaggeration. I had reason to suspect Thorp, but I had no proof—not an iota; and I was afraid another attack on Ellen might succeed."

"But why," asked the Chief, "would a man like Thorp murder his best friend in cold blood? He's confessed to the killing, but we haven't been able to get a word out of him about motive. It certainly can't be that measly twenty thousand dollars that Godfrey was leaving him."

Ellery sighed. "The collector breed are a strange lot, Newby. In spite of what he told Godfrey, Thorp probably didn't

consider himself too old to go on that expedition to West Africa; he must have been waiting desperately for years for what he thought was going to be a hundred thousand dollars to finance the trip. When he learned that Godfrey's carelessness had caused it to shrink to only one-fifth of that, he flipped. That expedition was the dream of his life. Is there anyone we can come to hate more than the loved one who disappoints and frustrates us?"

Newby held up his hand as Ellery rose. "Wait a minute! What made you suspect Thorp in the first place? It must be something fancy I missed."

Ellery did not display pride. His Wrightsville triumphs too often felt like defeats. Perhaps it was because he loved the old town, and it had been his lot to clean up her filth.

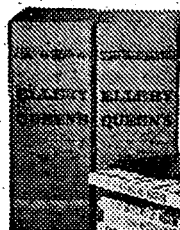
"Nothing fancy, Newby. The dreariest kind of slip on Thorp's

part. When you and I first went to the house, they told us in detail what had gone on at the discovery of the body. The line of previous action was very clear. Margaret Caswell rushed out of Godfrey's bedroom, crying out that the old man was—mark the word—*dead*. They all rushed upstairs except Thorp, who went to the downstairs phone, called Dr. Farnham, then called you here at headquarters. And what did Thorp tell you? That Mumford had been found, not merely dead, but *murdered*. Why should Thorp have leaped to the conclusion that the old man's death was unnatural *unless he already knew it?*

"You know, Newby," Ellery said with a half smile that apologized in advance, "Wolcott Thorp would have been far, far better off if he'd followed his own advice and—forgive me—kept mum."



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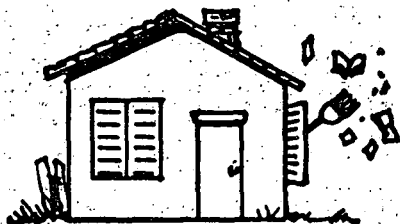
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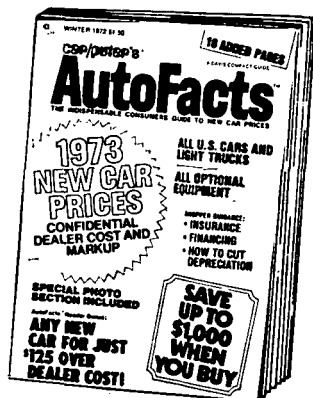
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